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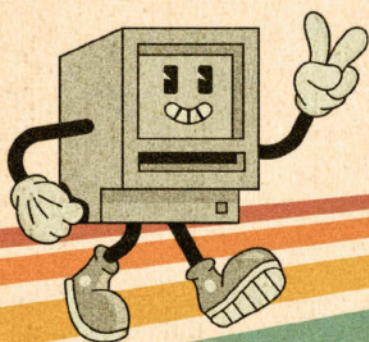


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12,708
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"BOND IS BACK IN AN EXPLOSIVE NEW ORIGIN STORY ADVENTURE"



It's crazy to think that there has not been a new videogame starring James Bond for going on a decade and a half at this point. The brutal truth is, though, that good James Bond games have been few and far between, with the positively ancient *GoldenEye 007* still considered the super spy's finest gaming outing.

That looks like it is about to dramatically change, though, with *Hitman* developer IO Interactive bringing Bond back in an explosive new origin story adventure filled with guns, gadgets, girls and, from what we've seen so far, great gaming fun, too.

ROBERT JONES

Bluesky

@robertnjones.bsky.social

This month

Walked into the PC Gamer Towers bar and ordered a vodka martini, stirred not shaken. Bartender Murray the Demonic Talking Skull nodded in approval.

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

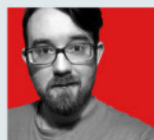
**EVAN LAHTI**

Bluesky

@elahti.bsky.social

This month

Invented a flying car and flew to Timbuktu, which is between Timbukone and Timbukthree. Sorry.

**FRASER BROWN**

Twitter

@FraserIBrown

This month

Heroically wore nought but a loincloth and sandals while fighting rats in the PCG Towers basement.

**ROBIN VALENTINE**

Bluesky

@robinvalentine

This month

Auto-battled his way to the front of the line at Greggs to score the last Cheese & Onion Bake.

**IAN EVENDEN**

Bluesky

@ieunden.wtf

This month

Kept monstrous horrors at bay by closing rifts in the fabric of reality. Oh, and in *Riftstorm* he...

PC Gamer (ISSN 1351-3540, USPS 24170), November issue 414, is published monthly with an extra issue in April by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK

Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

Periodicals Postage Paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PC Gamer, Air Business Ltd, c/o World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

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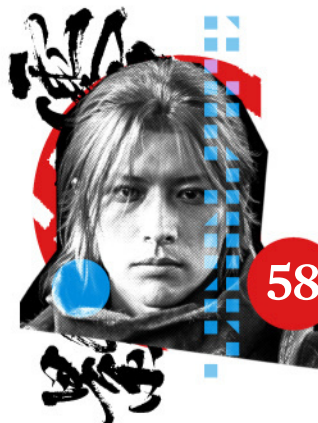
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Yes, I look exactly like this.

SAM I AM

Brits are **BYPASSING AGE VERIFICATION** with Death Stranding's photo mode

We recently saw the full introduction of the requirements outlined in the Online Safety Act in the UK, requiring "robust" age checks for users to access adult content online. People have found ways around at least some of these verification requirements after less than 24 hours. We've stumbled across people using Sam Porter Bridges selfies to bypass Discord's age verification.

Naturally, we thought to take this infiltration method for a spin. It

worked! We're enjoying smutty *Baldur's Gate III* fanfics on Discord again. Not that we couldn't anyway, we're all 18 or older here. Nor are we telling you to circumvent these restrictions. Adult content is for adults. But it is a fun hack, and a good way of keeping your actual face far away from Discord's age

**IT WON'T KNOW YOU
USED SAM PORTER'S
FACE ONCE
YOU'RE VERIFIED**

verification system, K-id. Now, K-id claims it does not permanently store any video selfies or personal identity documents after a user's age is confirmed. That means it's not the end of the world if you did upload your actual face, in theory, though I understand some aren't too comfortable with that prospect either way. That also means it won't know you used Sam Porter's face once you're verified, as it has no way of 'checking the records', so to speak. The method requires using a phone for the Discord age verification, opening *Death Stranding's* Photo Mode, and preparing a close-up of Sam.

CAFFIEND

OVERSTAYING WELCOME



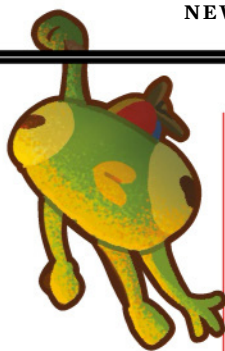
Cafe goers in Korea have been bringing monitors, printers and full-on dividers for work sessions, and Starbucks has issued a notice to leave the tech at home. Maybe if they buy a few coffees and a piece of cake, they should be allowed to bring the ultrawide monitor with them. ■ **JB**

PLUSH POSSESSION

BEGONE, FOUL DEMON



Peak devs have finally admitted to using the plush mascot Bing Bong as a vessel to speak to players when the game first came out. But, the feature was removed mid-June, so anyone who is still claiming that Bing Bong is talking to them is "full of sh*t" according to Aggro Crab. ■ **KR**

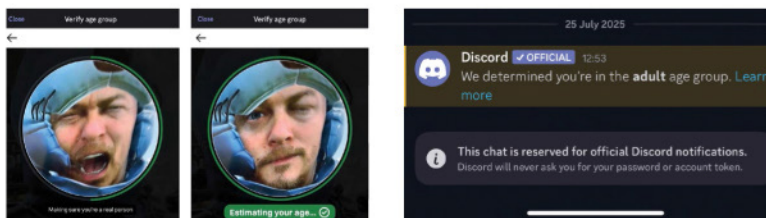


GUILTGP

AI AM NOT A LAWYER



Would you trust AI to rep you in court? You probably shouldn't. Just ask the pros at Semrad law firm, who got dinged by a judge for using ChatGPT-hallucinated caselaw in a case earlier this year. Their punishment? A \$5,000 sanction and a 9.00am AI-in-law seminar. ■ **JW**



TOP: To be fair, I can't tell the difference either.

ABOVE: Pals, I think computers might not be all that smart.

The K-id Discord ID verification is designed to weed out would-be imposters, and asks users to open and close their mouth to verify they're a real person. Thanks to Kojima's attention to detail, that's easy enough in *Death Stranding*, as 'Sam's expression' bar lets you pick through facial expressions. We weren't sure whether it would work for us because Sam was wearing his otter cap in our save file, but it worked fine, and took about 30 seconds.

ONLINE ENCRYPTION

Now I suppose we shouldn't say the UK government's age verification requirements have amounted to nothing because of this. It is just one of many possible age verification methods used across websites to answer the state's call for more stringent measures. It might not be so easy with other solutions.

But it's at least something to consider, along with the threat the bill might pose to our privacy thanks to vagaries of the language surrounding online encryption, as we shuffle ever closer to the digital panopticon. Still, I guess it tries to stop some people from seeing things they shouldn't, which isn't a bad thing; it's just difficult to get a bead on whether it actually will achieve that, and doesn't water down UK citizens' privacy in the process. ■

Jacob Ridley

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

To the Source

Garry's Mod now contains 'most of Counter-Strike: Source.'

Positive mental attitude

Phantom Blade Zero's boss says, "People make games for money, but we make money for games."

The basics of CQC

Hideo Kojima says he won't play the MGS 3 remake, mentions he knows loads of ways to kill people, doesn't elaborate, leaves.

Whoops

"I destroyed months of your work in seconds," says AI coding tool after deleting a dev's entire database.

Please stop

Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang says, "If you're not using AI, you're going to lose your job to someone who does."

Photo finish

World of Warcraft Classic player loses world first race by two minutes and 22 seconds after someone decided to verify it just in case.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Start typing 'Streisand' into a well-known internet search engine that's recently become riddled with AI slop, and the fabulous leading lady of *A Star is*

Born and Meet the Fockers is not the first result it will suggest. Instead, that honour goes to the Streisand Effect, the name applied to an unintended consequence of trying to suppress information that actually increases awareness of it.

The phenomenal Barbara's attempt to get an aerial photo of her home removed from a project documenting coastal erosion led to the image in question being viewed 420,000 times in a month, whereas it had only been downloaded six times previously, two of which were by Streisand's own lawyers. The Spy cares not if you have a three-octave range and multiple Oscars: that's pretty funny.

And so we turn to Ubisoft, which has been indulging in what appears to be a little information suppression of its own. It's hardly a surprise that an *AC4: Black Flag* remake was coming, as even Ubisoft's in-chief Yves Guillemot said the company was looking into remakes last year. *Black Flag* is a fan favourite so was always going to be at the top of the list for a graphical polish, especially as it still bears many of the hallmarks of the era in which it was released.

Then there were some slipups from a tie-in toy company, as well as Edward Kenway voice actor Matt Ryan, who was signing an autograph for a fan when he announced that The Sp... er, the fan might need to complete *Black Flag* again. Oh really?

A popular game from really not all that long ago getting a remake in 2025 is hardly earth-shattering news, given how well *Oblivion Remastered* has gone down. Admitting to its existence might even have led to some goodwill toward Ubisoft, and the PC gaming world would have continued turning until it came out, happy in the knowledge that there were piratical battles in the near future. What Ubi decided to do, according to Ryan and not backed up by any sort of documents that The Spy has seen, was threaten to sue.

And what this means is that if you use an internet search engine that's become riddled with AI slop to search for an *AC4* remake, you get news articles making

the whole thing look rather like a legal thriller, rather than the *Black Flag* blackout Ubi presumably wanted.

So what could the game look like? While a straightforward graphics update akin to that of *Oblivion*, which sees the original game running inside a Unreal Engine 5 wrapper, is a possibility, the *AC3* remaster received lighting and texture updates as well as UI improvements and this is more likely for *Black Flag*, as some version of the Anvil engine will still be used.

The big question is when it will launch, and whether it will do so before *Assassin's Creed Hexe*, the witch-themed game The Spy has known about since 2022 that's being made by the Montreal studio behind *Valhalla* and the original *Black Flag*. With that game likely to launch in

2026, the *AC4* remaster may well have fallen to the Barcelona bunch that did such a good job of *AC3*, and could be here by the end of 2025.

In Ubisoft's defence, The Spy is aware of the power of an NDA to protect your company or country's greatest secrets. But The Spy can't talk about that. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy looks forward to another pirate crossover: *Call of Duty*.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



TURTLE WORLD

TURTLE WOW has become one of World of Warcraft's biggest private servers

There are a lot of *Worlds of Warcraft* these days. I don't just mean the original – which fans now call 'live' or 'retail' – and the official lineup of old-school 'classic' servers set in various points throughout the game's history. There have always been private servers: fanmade builds hosted unofficially, often locked to an old patch or with major changes. And though they're typically snug in the underground with a few hundred players or so to their name, one relatively new server has been turning more heads. Around 72,000 simultaneously, in fact, at its current peak player count.

That number comes from Akalix, the community manager on *Turtle WoW*. Named for a design philosophy that favours slow-paced, social gameplay over intense dungeon crawls and showers of disposable loot, the server takes the pre-expansion 'vanilla' version of *World of Warcraft* and throws in a whole bunch of new dungeons, balance adjustments, and a pair of new races.

The average day brings in around 10,000 concurrent players at peak hours, making it one of the biggest private servers going – and as the team behind it continues work on new custom raids and a move to Unreal Engine 5, it's one of the most ambitious, as well.

What sets *Turtle WoW* apart from most servers remixing the popular MMO is a distinct polish and restrained approach to changes. I wasn't surprised to see playable high elves, but I was surprised to see *Turtle's* take on a high elf starting zone, with custom NPCs and quests and original music. It's all very careful not to add anything that might have been tonally out of place in 2004. Additions are justified with in-game lore from the era, new art assets are quality (or borrowed from official expansions) and more or less blend in with the old ones, and crucially, the maximum level has never budged from the original 60 since the server launched in 2018.

"We do not want to desecrate the design," Akalix says. "We don't want to trample over 2004 Blizzard's idea of this universe. We want to do as much as we can to play within and pay homage to the *World of Warcraft* vanilla and [*Warcraft* RTS series] era of lore. Our entire project's goal is to say, 'this what we think Blizzard would have done if they want a different route... if they just kept adding more updates that expanded Azeroth.'"

Modern Blizzard did its own remixed take on classic *World of Warcraft: Season of Discovery*, which added new instances and class abilities before it wound down earlier this year. But while those servers backported powerful spells from the live game and offered substantial experience boosts for new players, *Turtle* is careful to



Worlds aplenty

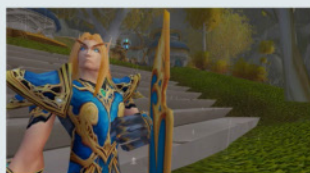
Official *World of Warcraft* servers include the modern game, a classic version that never moves on from the original pre-expansion version, and the classic progression servers which go through each expansion in release order at an accelerated cadence. Private servers are a wider umbrella catering to more specific tastes, but aside from rare permitted cases like *City of Heroes: Homecoming*, they're usually against the rules.



FAR LEFT: Bells and whistles aside, the grind is exactly as you remember it.

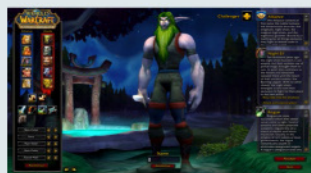
LEFT: Without server sharding, you'll experience all the pros and cons of a bustling faction capital.

TURTLE POWER *The modded server's foremost additions*



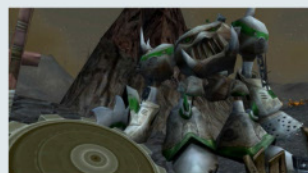
NEW PLAYABLE RACES

High elves and goblins join the game's playable selection straight from your *Warcraft III* hero lineup.



NEW CUSTOMISATION OPTIONS

New hairstyles, beards, tattoos and combinations of class and race are available right from character creation.



NEW ZONES

From new raid instances to low-level dungeons, there's more of Azeroth on display here than you might remember.



CHALLENGES

Ever wanted to see if you could get to max level by killing boars? Maybe not, but *Turtle WoW* has you covered anyway.

retain the funky buildcraft and glacial pacing that make classic solo play more difficult. When no one class can do everything, you need to lean on others to do anything.

It's the same reason you won't find group matchmaking or meeting stones that teleport players to the latest dungeons from halfway across the world, which are commonplace in the live MMO. These conveniences are common requests – after all, if someone wanted to experience every hardship exactly as it was, official classic servers do exist.

Akalix says finding out how much change is too much is a bit of a tightrope walk, but the guiding principle of *Turtle WoW* is that it fails unless it eschews anything that could impede socialisation and cooperation.

"If you're part way into [a dungeon], and one of your DPS is obviously newer to the game, he walked into a pack, pulled them, and got your group wiped once. In the random dungeon finder on retail right now... it's just a matter of 'Kick 'em, we'll get a new person in 30 seconds and not have to deal with that again,'" he says. "The old style makes you more invested in seeing your group succeed."

It's a grognardish sensibility familiar to any fan of old-school *Runescape*, *EverQuest's Project 99*, or the old-school renaissance taking the TTRPG world by storm right now, and Akalix does admit *Turtle* has built a reputation as a 'dad server'.

But to the team, that only highlights the appeal. "We've kind of embraced it in a way. Like, yeah. It's a

great server for a dad to come play on ... [*Turtle*] is not a game where you have the infinite treadmill. There's not this super-high level of commitment."

NO GUARANTEES

But while it does have a pick-up-and-play draw, it's like any other private server in that there's no guarantee it'll be here forever. It's against *World of Warcraft's* terms of service to host a custom server at all, and while there's not exactly a cash shop in *Turtle WoW*, there is an in-game store where donations to the development team can be converted into tokens and exchanged for cosmetic rewards.

When Blizzard ended development on *Season of Discovery* in 2025, it hinted at other experiments in the classic design space that may end up looking a lot like *Turtle*. Akalix said there's no way to know what tomorrow will bring, and that at the end of the day, *Turtle* is a passion project that will continue for as long as it's feasible.

"We can never know for sure what's going to happen. We are not mind readers, nor are we at Blizzard, but I can say confidently that I'm pretty certain there are some people from Blizzard who have even played on *Turtle*. I can tell you for certain they know that we exist," he said. "We are just here because we love *World of Warcraft* ... we obviously hope we are able to stick around for years to come. We plan to stick around for years to come." ■

Justin Wagner

IT'S A GROGNARDISH SENSIBILITY FAMILIAR TO ANY FAN OF OLD SCHOOL RUNESCAPE

1 month



BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE September 12, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

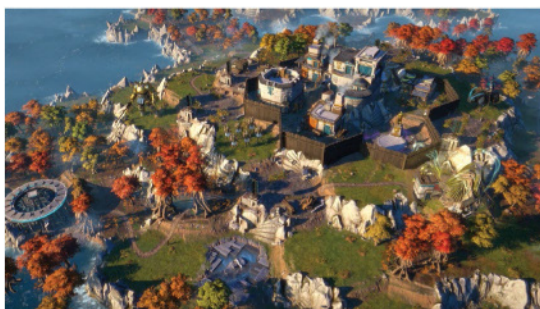
The mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises of billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action. Here's hoping it's better than the movie!



DYING LIGHT: THE BEAST

RELEASE September 19, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Techland

The game-changing FPS survival horror series returns with a new game that harkens back to the original's darker tone. Wreck your vengeance as Kyle Crane, half-man, half-beast.



ENDLESS LEGEND 2

RELEASE September 22, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Amplitude Studios

The acclaimed asymmetrical 4X strategy series returns after a lengthy hiatus with more excitingly distinct factions, fresh game mechanics, and a new planet to conquer.

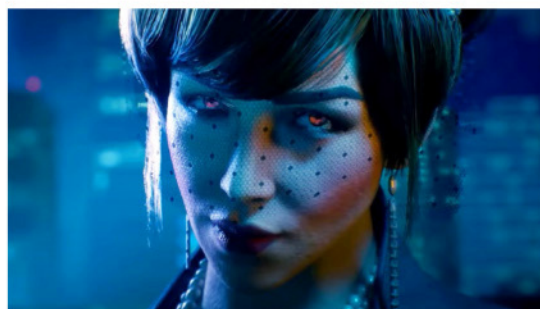
2 months



BATTLEFIELD 6

RELEASE October 10, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Battlefield Studios

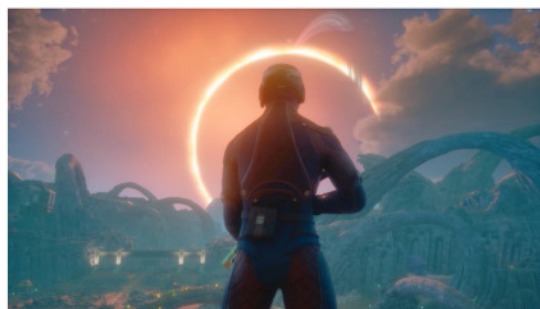
Multiplayer and single-player FPS action returns in the new all-out warfare experience. Drive tanks, fly planes and helicopters, as well as shoot on foot with your squad.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE October 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Fight your way through a modern-day Seattle on the brink of an open war as an elder vampire. The long-awaited first-person World of Darkness RPG is almost here. Hype!



THE OUTER WORLDS 2

RELEASE October 29, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment

Further interplanetary action and adventure from Obsidian, with both a revolution and an invasion taking place in a galaxy that reacts to your decisions.

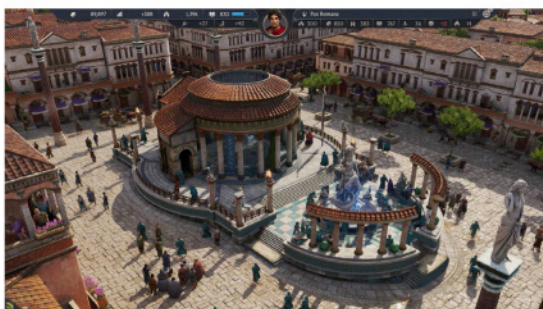
3 months



CAIRN

RELEASE November 5, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Game Bakers

A survival-climber from the creators of *Furi* and *Haven*. Climb anywhere and plan your route carefully, managing pitons and resources to survive unforgiving Mount Kami.



ANNO 117: PAX ROMANA

RELEASE November 13, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Mainz

The latest entry in the long-running *Anno* series promises to let gamers shape the Roman Empire in their image, be that via strong economic growth or bloody warfare.



CRIMSON DESERT

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Pearl Abyss

A gorgeous-looking open-world action-adventure set in the same universe as MMO *Black Desert*. Adventure in the brutal continent of Pywel and forge your own destiny.

4 months+



JUDAS

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Ghost Story Games

The new narrative FPS from Ken Levine places you on a disintegrating starship. As the titular Judas, can you escape? And what deals will you make or break to do it?



007 FIRST LIGHT

RELEASE 2026 | **DEVELOPER** IO Interactive

Step into the shoes of James Bond before he attained his 00 status. From the makers of *Hitman*, this third-person action-adventure game promises espionage and quips.



ONIMUSHA: WAY OF THE SWORD

RELEASE 2026 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

Wield a variety of deadly weapons as famous sword master Miyamoto Musashi. Incredibly visceral and kinetic combat is promised as Musashi fights through Edo-era Kyoto.

MOD

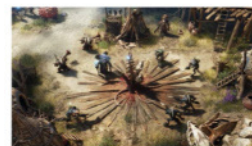
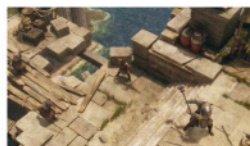
BLOODLINES RTX

If you're as stoked for *Bloodlines 2* as we are here at PC Gamer then replaying the OG classic with this new RTX remix mod is an almost mandatory experience. It's not perfect, but it's impressive nonetheless: Grab it here: tinyurl.com/4zfae3bb



PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
Grimlore GamesPUBLISHER
THQ NordicLINK
steam.pm/app/1154030/

TITAN QUEST II

A chill Greek holiday compared to many live service ARPGs

The Spartans have annoyed Nemesis, the Greek goddess of retribution, and now the ancient world is filled with monsters and undead. Unfortunately, this demonic deity is after your head, too. No need to stress, though: *Titan Quest II* (the sequel to 2006's mythological ARPG) is a pretty chill time, and it just snuck out in Early Access.

It might be considerably prettier than its predecessor – with the caveat that it's visually a touch conservative – but stepping into the sandals of my Greek hero felt like travelling back in time to a simpler era, when you could enjoy an ARPG without intense number crunching, theorycrafting or engaging in live service systems.

You whack monsters. Or stab them. Or turn them to ash with a lightning bolt. Then you snatch your rewards and maybe level up, where you can drip points into a flexible skill system. And then you just keep doing it.

BEAUTIFUL SIMPLICITY

At a time when ARPGs are getting more complex and life-consuming, *Titan Quest II* is a weird novelty, eschewing the huge skill trees of *Path of Exile* and *Last Epoch*, the MMO structure of *Lost Ark*, or the billions of currencies and MTX nonsense that most ARPGs are drowning in.

Even its most noteworthy feature feels subdued compared to the competition. Like the first *Titan Quest*, you create your own class by combining two different

masteries. At the moment, you can mess around with Earth, Storm, Warfare and Rogue masteries, mixing and matching the skills contained within them.

There's one wrinkle that the sequel throws into the mix, though: each skill can be augmented with modifiers when you level it up. This is something we've already seen in other ARPGs, however, including *Diablo IV*, though I should add that there's a decent number of modifiers, some of which change the skills they interact with.

Fissure, for instance, is a magical attack in the Earth mastery, but since I decided to build a melee fighter-style hero, I picked the modifier that turned Fissure into a melee attack, where I use my weapon to create a huge crack in the ground – a crack filled with lava, thanks to another modifier I picked.

Character building isn't brain dead, then, even though it's considerably more straightforward than what I've become used to. And with only two passive points and two active points per level, split between two masteries and your core abilities (your basic attack, a dodge and a magical shield) it does maintain the ARPG friction that comes from being forced to prioritise your power fantasies.

It could be a nice break from the more involved ARPGs that demand so much attention, but I confess that at first I found myself trying to enjoy it, rather than doing so. My brain's just too warped: I need the complexity now.

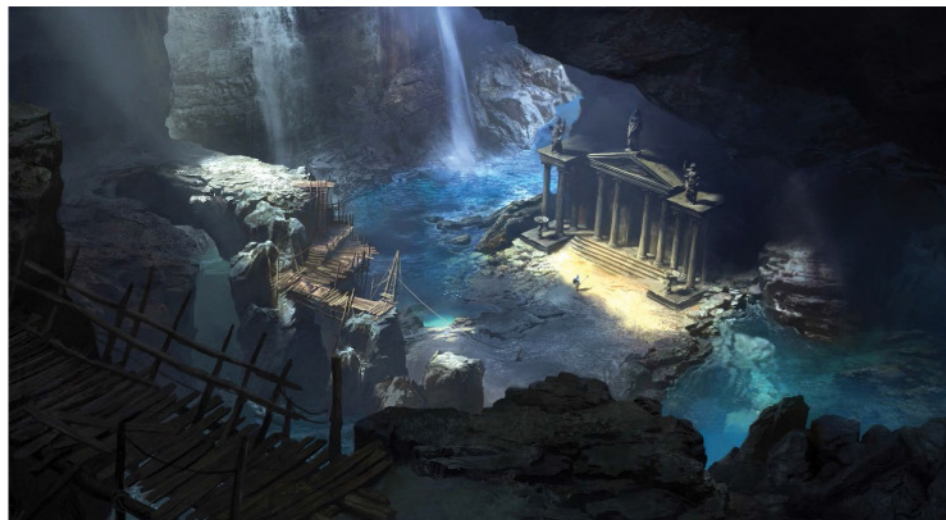
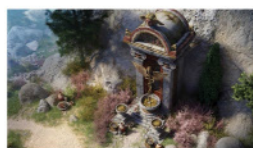
FEELING CRABBY

Slowly growing my list of skills, most of which are pretty conventional – fireballs, lightning strikes, heavy attacks – just wasn't sparking joy. And while combat isn't floaty, it can sometimes feel like it is. Attacks have weight, enemies react accordingly, but there's just something ever so slightly off. There's an occasional lack of precision, with enemy melee attacks hitting you when it seems like they shouldn't. The combat sound effects contribute to this, too, especially the basic attack, where the timing of the sound effect just isn't quite right.

Titan Quest II's first impression isn't helped by the fact that the entire first region is populated by crabs, which I don't associate with Greek mythology. It's 90% crabs, and only two varieties of them.

PLAYED
IT

YOU CREATE YOUR OWN CLASS BY COMBINING TWO DIFFERENT MASTERIES

Titan Quest II

After a couple of hours, though, things start to look up, as *Titan Quest II* began to throw a greater variety of pesky foes at me all at once – cowardly magic users who hung back to annoy me from afar, tanky beefcakes trying to distract me from their weaker pals, enemies who could interrupt and stun. Basic stuff, true, but working together in tandem they created encounters that were engaging, and occasionally pretty challenging.

Titan Quest II's faction system wasn't obvious at first, but it did start to wind up as I got deeper into the second area, and that's when I started to witness welcome, and sometimes fatal, surprises. See, enemies will form factions and work together, doing more than simply charging at you in the hopes of a quick kill.

The first time I witnessed some proper teamwork was when I was crushing some crabs for the millionth time – your war with them will continue even after you leave the first region. I'd murdered most of them, when two survivors simply turned around and scurried away. I'd never seen any enemies retreat before. I gave chase, only to be drawn into an ambush, where half a dozen fishy lads ran at me as the ranged crab king spat out liquid that I hoped was just water from behind them.

Soon after, I found some giant bats going bonkers in a ruin, and as I entered they started swirling around me, swooping

in to give me some nasty nips. I'm a big fan of bats and would prefer not to kill them, and it turned out that I didn't actually need to. They were only aggressive because two fish-men were also in the ruin, and they were slamming their shields to create a cacophony that made the bats incensed. Once I killed these noisy lads, the bats immediately chilled out.

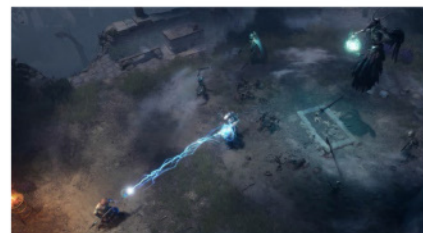
I'm used to ARPGs using numbers and power to overwhelm me, but *Titan Quest II*'s creatures actually use tactics. Not complex tactics – but this glimmer of intelligence makes all the difference.

FUN IN THE SUN

Now I'm starting to really enjoy my trip to sunny Greece. Surprises are few and far between, but there's an abundance and pleasing variety of quests; maps full of hidden treasures and plenty of nooks and crannies to explore; and enough skill combos to dig into so that you should have plenty of build concepts to experiment with. And if, like me, you find the challenge posed by the ancient world's monsters a little on the easy side, you can always pray to Ares to increase the difficulty.

Developer Grimlore Games – behind *SpellForce 3* previously – is going to be doling out "major updates" every three months during Early Access, which will include things like proper character customisation and a transmog system, but one thing it won't be adding is microtransactions. We might be getting DLC and expansions, but the base game is a 'buy it and you get everything' deal. What a novel idea.

Fraser Brown



ENEMIES WILL FORM FACTIONS AND WORK TOGETHER, DOING MORE THAN CHARGING AT YOU



ABOVE: Human versus giant crab, just an average day at the office in *Titan Quest II*.

LEFT: Enemies use basic tactics and will retreat if a fight is going south for them.



PREVIEW

Aether & Iron



ABOVE: Anti-grav technology has taken cars, roads, and even New York City into the sky in *Aether & Iron*.

RIGHT: The game is a fully voiced, roughly 20-hour experience.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Seismic SquirrelPUBLISHER
Seismic SquirrelLINK
steam.pm/app/1836560

AETHER & IRON

This tactics RPG could be the next great noir videogame

People mill about laughing in the sun, but something's off. The world feels grainy and sluggish like I'm wading through sand. I need to keep the girl close. *Aether & Iron* is so dripping with noir it's leaving behind fedora-shaped puddles. It's full of steely internal dialogue like this where you hear the main character, Gia Randazzo, take in her surroundings.

Gia has good reason to have her guard up: her world is a fantastical, fractured, floating New York City in the 1930s with the gangsters and violence synonymous with noir, but these goons have flying cars and lasers to conduct their bad business. Adding to the noir setup, we meet Gia "at a low point in her career [when] her reputation has dried up, her money has disappeared, and she's left with few options to turn her life around," Tyler Whitney, narrative lead on the project, tells me.

I liked the introductory section of *Aether & Iron* that I played recently while meeting with developer Seismic Squirrel in San Francisco, and I think it'll be a well-written adventure-style game that nails its genre when it releases sometime later in 2025. It's a fully-voiced, 20-hour-long experience that combines decision-driven storytelling and, in a first for turn-based games, flying car tactics combat that plays out on a road grid.

In the combat sections, which can appear as scripted or random encounters, you control up to three friendly vehicles that are tied to party characters. Each of

these flying cars has differing directional attacks, movement and health. In a garage, a mechanic can swap out the weapons and equipment of Gia's ride, outfitting it with the gear you buy or otherwise acquire in the campaign.

THE EMPIRE CITY

What has my attention most is *Aether & Iron*'s deep approach to plumbing New York City's actual history into its sci-fi world. Despite being a floating city, this version of New York is grounded in many real-life figures, factions, and moments from late 19th/early 20th century New York, says the developer.

One is 'Marm' Magdalene, a character based on Fredericka Mandelbaum, who the studio says was seen as the queen of New York's underworld. "Amongst her many feats of thievery, she developed a large crime network that included a group of largely female lieutenants and a school for teaching criminality," says Whitney. "Marm takes the historical premise of Mandelbaum and asks, what would she have become if she hadn't had the law breathing down her neck?"

PLAYED IT

As you make decisions in the story, or if you, say, accidentally-on-purpose blast a civilian taxi during one of your road battles, you'll accrue heat, a measurement of how much attention Gia's getting across the city. Heat can be shed, but it's not strictly negative: it's a valid approach if you want to roleplay as more of an out-in-the-open figure in New York who wears their intentions on their sleeve.

Whitney also tells me that heat will come into play during some of the branching points of *Aether & Iron*'s story, which includes mutually exclusive missions. "There is one mission where we engage in a prison break and we are explicitly told to lie low," he says. "If we follow that directive, ignoring all distractions, we can keep our heat down."

This isn't a universe where you'll see magic crystals or mobster ogres demanding protection money, but a more volatile, decopunk, semi-fantastical but more-or-less recognisable version of NYC that you'll drag the main character through. It's refreshing to see a narrative RPG with such a strong sense of place.

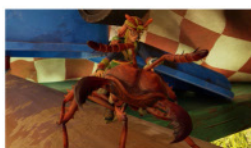
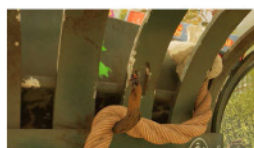
Evan Lahti

YOU CONTROL UP TO THREE FRIENDLY VEHICLES THAT ARE TIED TO PARTY CHARACTERS



Vehicle parts can be upgraded.

Grounded 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Obsidian Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Xbox Game Studios

LINK

steam.pm/app/2661300

GROUNDED 2

Welcome to the ant party

When *Grounded 2* finished downloading, it was pretty late. I lied to myself and pretended I'd just dip in for a minute, get my footing, and then call it a night. Seven hours later, I was picking fights with spiders atop my chitinous steed, fending off invading cyborg ants with my acorn turrets and taking pictures of lovely butterflies – it's good to take breaks from all the murder.

This game is gonna be a nightmare for my desire to one day go to bed at a decent hour. It doesn't rock the boat too much, but the ways in which Obsidian is building on and tweaking the formula established in its first survival game, well, they're just so damn good. It's *Grounded*, but a much better *Grounded*.

ROOM TO GROW

Grounded 2 is absolutely gorgeous. The colourful cartoon aesthetic from the original game has been maintained, naturally, but benefits from greatly improved lighting and higher quality textures. It is a game of mundane park detritus transformed into stunning, surreal vistas, where a dirty old camera looks like a striking alien monument. There isn't another survival game out there that's better for sightseeing.

More than once I became spider chow because I was distracted by the sun peeking through towering blades of grass, or because I was enchanted by the incredible view of the park from atop its chaotic picnic table. It's almost like the

beauty of the natural world is working with the critters, trying to hypnotise me, just in time for dinner.

I have come face to face with the grim spectre of death many, many times during my stay in Brookhollow Park. The first *Grounded* was not an incredibly easy game to solo, but the sequel throws greater challenges at you early on, making a group even more of a boon. But you'll quickly start to feel tough once you befriend some bugs.

FAST FRIENDS

My anthill heist took me an embarrassingly long time to pull off. I'd been sent down into the park's labyrinthine depths by the CEO of definitely-not-evil Ominent, who almost certainly doesn't have ulterior motives, to collect a red ant soldier egg. It was a long journey, full of soldier attacks, two surprise spider attacks and several corpse runs. But at the end I had the egg, and shortly after, my first mount.

Actually, 'mount' doesn't begin to capture just how essential your bug friends – restricted to a soldier ant and orb weaver at the moment, but with more on their way – will become. The ant, for instance, can chop down grass, carry a large number of planks, provide you with extra storage on the go and fight. While riding it, you control its attacks, but if you hop off your saddle you can team up, both of you fighting your foes together.

Being a bit more important than worker ants also means soldiers can command their little friends. Yep, you can stroll around with a bug posse if you want.

It's a huge boon for exploration, too. Even if these buggies, as Obsidian calls them, simply served you as a novel mode of transportation, they'd still be brilliant. My ant moves like the clappers – the Usain Bolt of Brookhollow Park. It's got an impressive leap, as well. This makes the intended size of *Grounded 2* feel a little less daunting. When you've got an ant-shaped Bugatti at your beck and call, life feels so much easier.

Friction is necessary for a survival game, but Obsidian's managed to find a fantastic balance between empowerment and challenge. Even with my ant, I faced plenty of trials and tribulations, but I felt

PLAYED IT

THE CARTOON AESTHETIC FROM THE ORIGINAL GAME HAS BEEN MAINTAINED

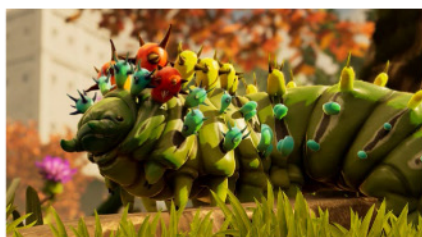
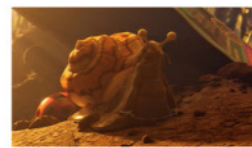
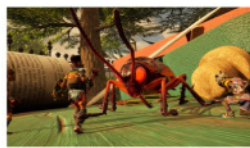
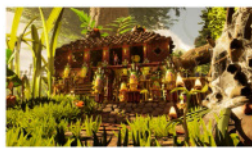


Grounded 2

RIGHT: Just popping out to pick up the latest issue of PC Gamer magazine.

BELOW: Make sure to upgrade your weapons if you want to beat bugs convincingly.





capable of doing so much more than I could in the original *Grounded*. I could travel further, carry more, build up my base faster. Fewer frustrations and more fun – that's my experience so far.

I still got lost in an underground maze; I still got massacred by a larva that I dug out of the ground, expecting to find a grub; I still had to plan, prioritise and pay attention to my stamina, hunger and thirst. It can be tricky and savage and frantic. But it achieves this while still ironing out some of the wrinkles.

BE PREPARED

Take the Omni-Tool – an addition that's less impressive than an army of ants on paper, but one that does a lot to make *Grounded 2* feel like a huge improvement over its predecessor. The Omni-Tool replaces your gathering tools, so now you've got one tool that can be expanded and upgraded, and it doesn't even take up a single inventory slot.

Regardless of what you've got equipped, when you walk up to a blade of grass or a boulder, you can just start harvesting at the touch of a button.

Resource runs are so much more pleasant with this handy Swiss Army Knife. No more mucking around in your inventory, switching out tools or changing hotbars – you just hit a button. The friction instead comes from the other things you might encounter on the run, whether it's an orb weaver hunting you down, running out of food, or getting stuck in dangerous, unfamiliar territory after dark.

In the first *Grounded*, I'm more of a builder. In my latest playthrough, much of my time has been spent constructing a handsome house on top of a juice carton, while my girlfriend risks life and limb hunting down resources, murdering tadpoles or getting lost.

But in *Grounded 2*, I've chosen to spend a lot more time adventuring. This is partly because I don't want to get too invested in a meaty building project when my save might get murdered during an Early Access update. But it's also down to *Grounded 2* doing a lot more to encourage you to go on frequent adventures.

Instead of a burger-making robot asking you to retrieve computer chips,

you've got humans giving you quests and challenging you. The aforementioned CEO, for instance, sends you all over the map in bespoke missions, and there's a mysterious hacker who sends waves of cyborg bugs to mess you up, encouraging you to progress further, so that you can unlock better gear or build nasty traps.

EXTERMINATOR

Getting into scraps with bugs is a lot more appealing this time around thanks to more robust combat mechanics. You can dash and dodge; when you charge your attacks you get a satisfying little sparkle, telling you it's time to unleash hell; and both the gear and mutation systems have been greatly improved, specifically by tying them into a more class-like structure. You're free to mix and match all you like, but *Grounded 2* nudges you towards making more cohesive builds.

The critters themselves are more deadly, too, with a variety of killer attacks and the ability to block – a block that's best broken by battering them with a charged shot. There's definitely a sense that we're moving into action-RPG territory here, and the game benefits greatly from it, making each encounter more engaging, whether you're weaving between the grass to avoid a butterfly's elemental assaults, finding a nice perch so you can safely use your magic staff (not actually magic) to melt your foes, or trying to pull off a perfect parry so a scorpion doesn't kill you with a pincer barrage.

Butterflies and scorpions represent two of the many new creatures you'll have to tango with. You'll also meet friendly snails who hide in their shells when threatened (they are fun to watch), incredibly hardy cockroaches and the dreaded praying mantis.

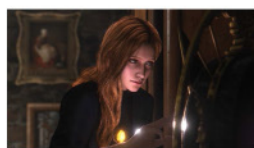
The older bugs have been tweaked, too, and in some cases have been given quite the glow-up, particularly the wolf spider, which now looks even more demonic. I'm not ashamed to say that I mostly hide from that big bastard.

I encountered a bug of the more progress-halting kind, as well, which Obsidian has been looking into, so I wasn't able to experience the entirety of the Early Access story. Unexpectedly, this hasn't soured me on *Grounded 2* at all. Hopefully it will be fixed by the time you lot get your hands on it, and in the meantime I've just been having a wonderful time running around the park getting into scraps and japes.

Fraser Brown

RESOURCE RUNS ARE SO MUCH MORE PLEASANT WITH THIS HANDY SWISS ARMY KNIFE

Killer Inn



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBADEVELOPER
Square EnixPUBLISHER
Square EnixLINK
s.team/a/1598230

KILLER INN

A social deduction murder party game with a dash of deathmatch

I I'm at a bustling house party when I notice another guest standing completely still in a corner, not engaging with the crowd. I do what everyone does in a situation like this: I walk up behind them, point a revolver at the back of their head from a distance of roughly one millimetre, and pull the trigger.

What happens next is what often happens in a situation like this: the guest, who has been standing completely motionless for at least 15 seconds, chooses that precise moment to move. I miss the easiest shot in history as my target suddenly jukes to the right and runs out of the room.

I've committed a major party faux pas: I've just exposed myself as an assassin in *Killer Inn*, the multiplayer social deduction action game from

PLAYED IT

Tactic Studios and Square Enix. Inside a sprawling mansion, 24 people are assigned the role of lamb or wolf. The goal of the lambs is to escape. The goal of the wolves is to kill them.

I was a lamb for my first two matches, which is my preferred way to play: when you're a wolf you can see who is who among the guests, but when you're a lamb, anyone could be out to get you – the scruffy handyman, the wealthy CEO, the guy dressed like a pirate, the gamer who carries around a huge mechanical keyboard in her backpack.

The mansion is filled with items hidden in drawers and chests for players to scabble around and find: guns, knives, health packs, stamina pills, explosive traps

and useful items like crowbars that let you pry open crates to find even more loot.

A fresh corpse will contain clues: a scrap of the killer's clothing, a hair from their head, a fingerprint that can be examined with a microscope at a work bench. Wolves can sometimes conceal their tracks, but each kill is bound to give away something.

LAMB CHOPS

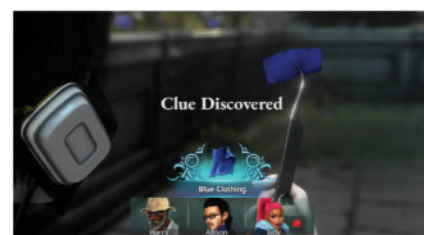
Lambs aren't helpless, either: they can use all the same weapons as the wolves and start killing them right back. As a lamb I discovered a slightly safer way to get what I wanted: pickpocketing. When players interacted with NPCs or examined corpses, I'd drop into a crouch behind them and root through their pockets with a little theft minigame.

The backstory of this murder party is a little unclear to me: I get the concept of a rich eccentric inviting a bunch of people to their sprawling mansion and forcing them to play bloodsports, but there are a few weird details. The only way lambs can escape the island is to defeat a quartet of hovering golden orbs called guardians that each contain a key that unlocks a gate leading to an old-timey schooner that can be sailed to safety.

Though I prefer being a lamb, I did much better as a wolf in the final game. I solved a couple of puzzles to acquire guns, I followed some lambs until they were isolated, then murdered them before pretending to examine their corpses when everyone else arrived. I wasn't too concerned with hiding my identity after a while: there were a bunch of wolves left toward the end of the match and we just ran around killing off the rest of the lambs like it was team deathmatch.

Killer Inn is facing the same challenge these kinds of games always have: they work infinitely better with people you know than random strangers, and for those of us who don't have 23 friends, it can be tricky finding groups who will work together. But there's the potential here for the best kind of goofy fun that only murder party games can provide: the creeping paranoia, the loud group accusation sessions, and the hilarity of a mad scramble when the opportunity for a clean hit turns into a messy fiasco.

Christopher Livingston



Killers can cover their tracks if they're quick enough.

I'VE COMMITTED A PARTY FAUX PAS: I'VE JUST EXPOSED MYSELF AS AN ASSASSIN

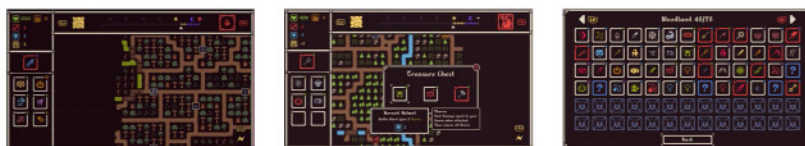


ABOVE: Every corpse is a chance for a fresh clue.

LEFT: Rich eccentric invites randoms to mansion for a spot of bloodsport. Average week in Britain, really.

FAR LEFT: Every clue that you find helps narrow down who the killer is.



He is Coming

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Chronicle

PUBLISHER

Hooded Horse

LINK

steam.pm/app/2824490

HE IS COMING

A auto-battler that has me doing RPG adventures in minutes

If you took a sprawling, 100 hour, turn-based RPG and put it in a car crusher, the dense little cube that spat out the other end of it would probably be a bit like *He is Coming*. This Early Access roguelike auto-battler is an exercise in absolute videogame minimalism.

You move around a large fantasy world battling monsters, finding loot, talking to NPCs, and taking on increasingly difficult bosses, until you save the world. But you don't choose your moves in those fights, nor do you level up or pick your stats. There's almost no story, the NPCs only speak to offer services or wares, and time passes in the blink of an eye as the game counts down to the emergence of each new boss. Adventures are often over in five minutes – even your most successful probably won't last longer than ten.

So what choices are you actually making in that short time? The strategy of *He is Coming* essentially boils down to building your inventory of equipment. Everything you do in the world, you do with the goal of equipping a killer selection of items, with those being what dictates how your character fights. You can't even hold a lot of them – you have just four slots at first, gaining two each time you beat a boss, and ultimately taking eight into the third and final battle.

They're not complex items – most of them just have one, simple effect, with usually less than a line of description.

There's no juggling of a +5% crit bonus here and a +2% block chance there. That makes choices quick – but not necessarily easy. When I first started playing *He is Coming*, I thought there wasn't enough to it. It felt like I was just a victim of random chance as I walked around the map, grabbing whatever items looked good and then usually dying to the second boss. Runs seemed too fleeting to be interesting. But something kept drawing me back, and the more I banged my head against it, the more I realised there was more going on in *He is Coming* than I was giving it credit for.

EVERY SECOND COUNTS

Simply wandering the map opening treasure chests isn't enough – you need to maximise every minute to wring the most out of this pixel-art world. Learning how the map works and how to traverse it efficiently is key. Soon I was beelining towards fast travel points, hunting down crystal balls that reveal the locations of key sites, and finding ways to avoid wasting precious time resting.

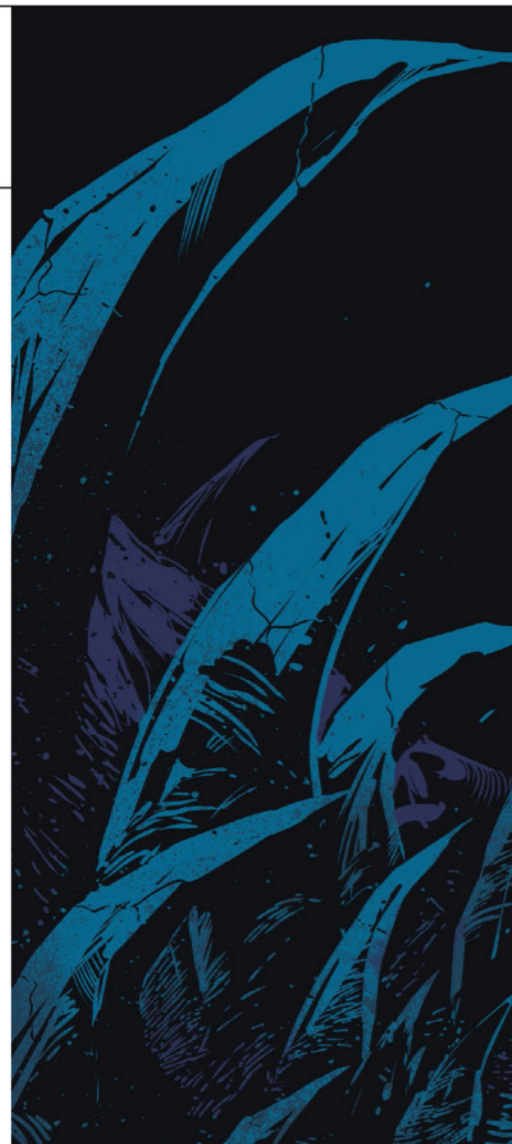
Items are simple, but once you start focusing on the possible synergies between them, the results can be surprising. The common items found in chests often provide the raw power and stats you need, but the next step

is finding the graves, merchants, and other hidden-away sources of rare and heroic items. These often provide the crucial effect that turns a basic set of bonuses into an engine of destruction.

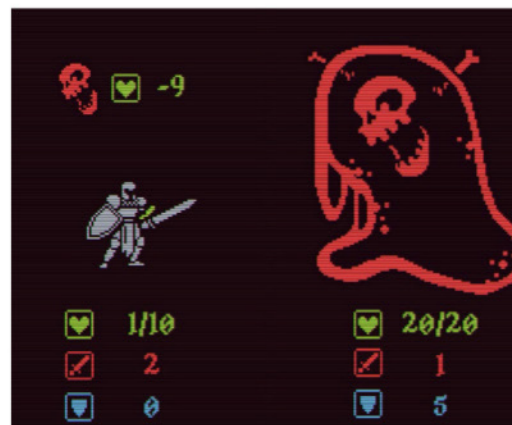
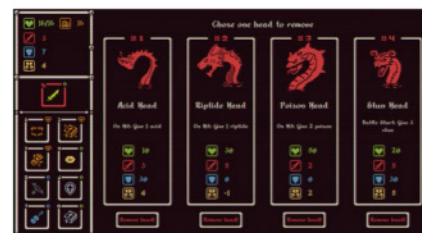
A breastplate that improves your armour stat is a useful boost to your survivability, but not much beyond that. But if you then find a rare time bomb, which increases potential damage each turn but explodes when your armour runs out... suddenly you could be working towards a build based around delaying that moment as long as possible, stacking different armour effects together discarding usual standbys like healing and attack bonuses.

This isn't ground-breaking stuff for the roguelike genre, admittedly – but it's cramming that usual rollercoaster ride of scrambling for a build into a few minutes rather than an hour, and there's definitely something compelling about that.

Robin Valentine



PLAYED IT



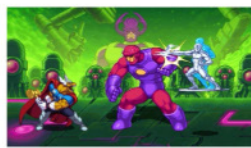
YOU NEED TO MAXIMISE EVERY MINUTE TO WRING THE MOST OUT OF THIS PIXEL ART WORLD



ABOVE: The Demon King reaching for world domination? Or editor Rob reaching for a pint? You decide.

LEFT: Combining items with strong synergies can lead to interesting builds.

Marvel Cosmic Invasion



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Tribute Games Inc

PUBLISHER
Dotemu, Gamirror Games

LINK
steam.pm/app/2753970

MARVEL COSMIC INVASION

A game that makes Marvel superheroes exciting again

Superheroes so rarely feel right in modern videogames. The spandex-clad stars of my favourite comics don't grind for endgame loot, they don't waste their time on pointless sidequests, and they don't fight the same grey robots over and over.

Heading into my first hands-on with *Marvel Cosmic Invasion*, I knew it'd be a good 2D beat 'em up – developer Tribute Games Inc proved its chops with excellent throwback *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge*, and I expected to be satisfied with the same again with a Marvel skin. What I didn't expect is how properly super it would feel.

Pick any of the game's 15 playable characters, load up a level, and within seconds you're kicking ass in that hero's signature style. Wolverine leaps halfway across the screen to stab enemies to pieces. She-Hulk snatches flying foes right out of the air and chokeslams them down into the pavement. Rocket Raccoon blasts out a furious barrage of lasers, grenades and landmines wherever he goes. Despite simple, accessible movesets – everyone basically just has an attack, a special, a defend and a super move, plus air and dashing variants of those – each character feels uniquely powerful.

As Captain America, you're a master of defence and controlling the fight, with long-range shield throws for crowd control, and a sturdy block that can parry with the right timing and deflect

projectiles. Spider-Man has a far-reaching dodge and a web-swing that can traverse most of the screen through the air, allowing him to constantly outmanoeuvre enemies. Meanwhile, Nova is a master of keep-away, firing long-range laser beams, flying above foes' heads and raining down on key targets with an absolutely glorious divekick.

The tag team system allows those differences to play into your strategy in a meaningful way. You can play as a team of up to four in co-op, but each player also gets to choose two characters, and swap between them at will. You can certainly just pick your two favourites and have a blast, but there are also tactical combinations to be found.

Spider-Man's dodge, for example, makes him excellent at dealing with shield enemies. They can't be damaged from the front and make powerful charging attacks, but he can easily get behind them and pummel their vulnerable backs. He's not so well-equipped to take on a horde of lesser foes, at which point switching to Phyla-Vell and using her brilliantly wide sword swings to clear the field can make the encounter a breeze. Those specialities help give each hero their time to shine and show off.

PLAYED IT

SATURDAY MORNING

The cherry on top is the crisp, colourful pixel-art animation. With no obligation to make its heroes look realistic or tactical, *Cosmic Invasion* can just embrace their personalities with the stretchy exuberance of a Saturday morning cartoon. Rocket leaps around wildly like a feral animal, Venom drags himself along with distorted arms and warps into different forms, and Storm spins herself into whirlwind attacks.

Amidst all that creativity and chaos, however, the core beat 'em up formula is very familiar. Like *Shredder's Revenge*, it's a modern take on the genre, taking out a lot of the old inconveniences and sprinkling in modern improvements, but it's not experimental in the way that *Absolum's* mix of beat 'em up with roguelike is. From what I've played, you walk from left to right, you beat up bad guys, you eventually reach a boss, and then you move on to the next level – just like in the arcades.

Robin Valentine



WOLVERINE LEAPS HALFWAY ACROSS THE SCREEN TO STAB ENEMIES TO PIECES



ABOVE: There's a large roster of 15 playable heroes.

LEFT: Captain America is a master of defence and controlling a fight.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Owlskip

PUBLISHER
Owlskip

LINK
s.team/a/3756940

THE RATLINE

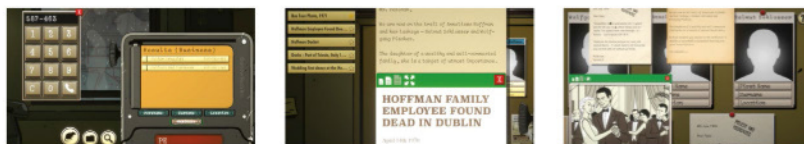
Putting it all together

Every morning, someone slides a dossier under your door, and you get to work identifying the people within it. This might not sound all that exciting, but the demo available on Steam puts that idea to bed: it's compelling stuff, filled with the joy of realising that a clue exists, then following it.

PLAYED
IT

The game begins with a dead priest. He's got a big knife in him, and the word 'ratline' daubed on the wall above him. Connoisseurs of 20th century history will immediately recognise that word: the name for escape routes used by Nazis to flee Europe at the end of the Second World War.

You're Perlman, an investigator who specialises in identifying people. Your first case is to find the alias of a thief operating in New Jersey by putting together hints from photos and a newspaper article. You do this by flipping between two screens, one a pin-board with your evidence on it,



the other a rolodex and telephone on which you look up a number then manually dial it in a way that will surely horrify call-averse generations.

That's because the game is set in 1971, a rainy New York providing the backdrop. Languid saxophone music plays on the radio (which you can retune), and Perlman's voice is a gruff one that could be provided by his namesake Ron.

NOIR AS NIGHT

The game's premise is not about identifying petty thieves and conmen, but escaped Nazis. Dentists from Argentina and Canada are the first to come under your lens, a combination of Wehrmacht photos, letters from their mother, and a call to the Canadian Dental Society

eventually picking out the faces and aliases of two brothers. While working through the first few cases you'll also notice the same man appearing in several photos, a hint at a larger story that ties the individual investigations together.

At the beginning of the game it's not clear what the mysterious organisation you're working for is doing with the information you're providing – nor if you're getting paid, which is a prime concern to private eyes – but we can safely assume they're not getting a medal and a cake.

The Nazi escape route is an international network, and soon you're working with agents in Buenos Aires, figuring out the movements of chefs between restaurants scattered across the world, and phoning up the police in Ireland only to be told to piss off.

The Ratline is from Lucas Pope, the designer of *Papers, Please* and *Return of the Obra Dinn*, and like those games it provides you with the information you need, sometimes obliquely, then waits for you to make the connections. Its tale of Nazi hunting is a fascinating one, and the full game could be quite special.

**YOU'RE PERLMAN,
AN INVESTIGATOR
WHO SPECIALISES IN
IDENTIFYING PEOPLE**



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 18

DEVELOPER
3DClouds

PUBLISHER
3DClouds

LINK
[s.team/a/3194360](https://steam/a/3194360)

FORMULA LEGENDS

Very serious sport gets fun arcade makeover

Jumping in very fast cars and roaring around a track has been a staple of videogames for decades, and apparently they even do it in the real world too. *Formula Legends* takes that petrolhead world and superdeforms it to create a colourful and even cute racing game.

It's all completely unlicensed, so expect a lot of legally distinct branding for teams and track designs that almost, but not quite, mirror real-life favourites such as Spa and the Nürburgring – and the same is true of the drivers, who have skills and perks to help win races. It's definitely an arcade racer rather than a simulator in the vein of EA's *F1* game, but it fills an often dour sport with personality as a result.

DRAW REDUCTION

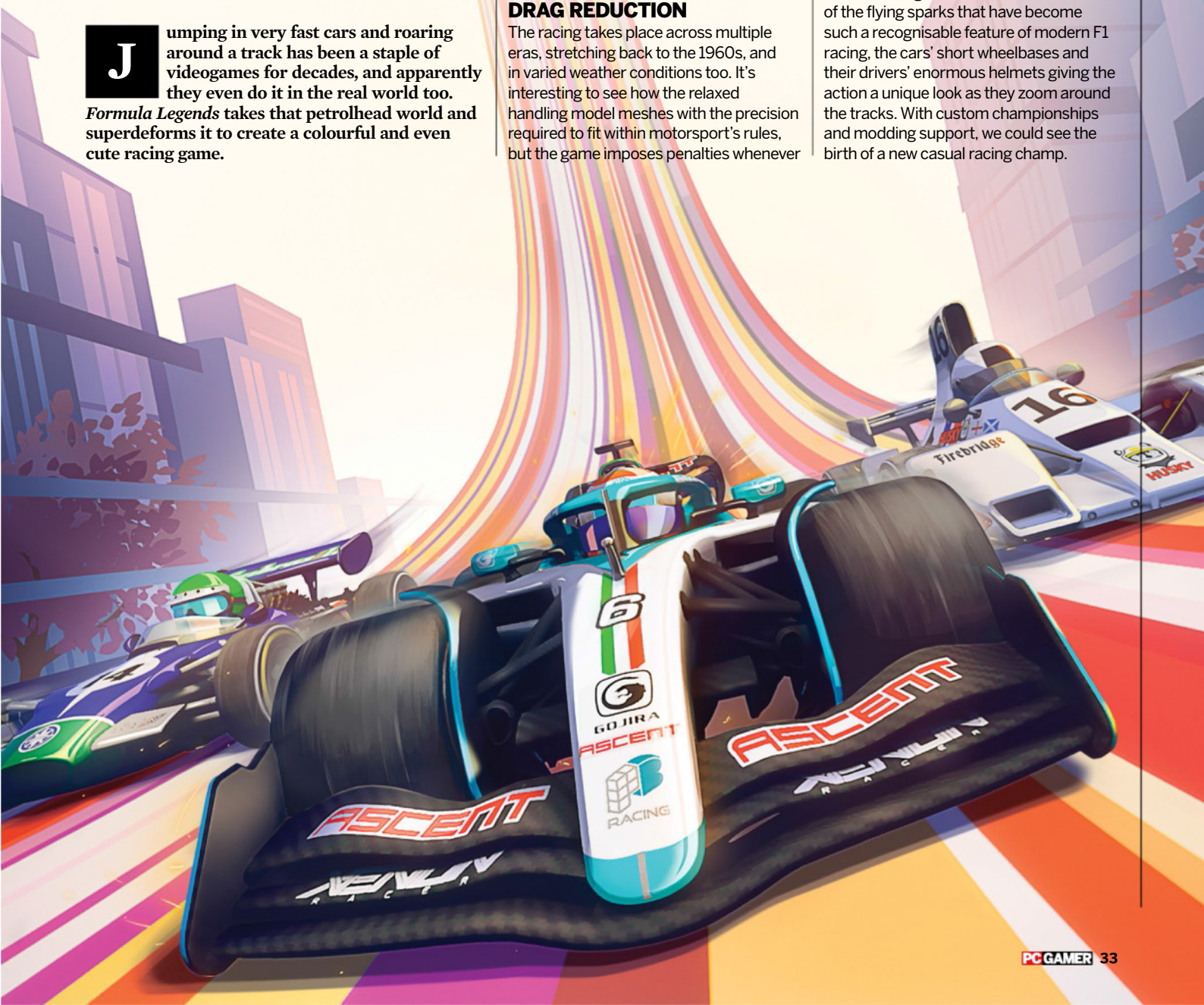
The racing takes place across multiple eras, stretching back to the 1960s, and in varied weather conditions too. It's interesting to see how the relaxed handling model meshes with the precision required to fit within motorsport's rules, but the game imposes penalties whenever

you wander off the track, and you soon learn to avoid them by staying on the racing line. Pit-stop strategy is a huge part of motor racing, and *Formula Legends* turns them into QTEs, a timed button-press required for each tyre change.

It's a neat way to make you feel involved in all the scurrying about from the mechanics and technicians, bringing a bit of interactivity to something that could have been a cutscene.

The game mimics the camera angles of motorsport TV coverage, the cube-headed crown jiggling up and down at the start of a race before the camera sinks down low behind the rear wing of a car. There's even some of the flying sparks that have become such a recognisable feature of modern F1 racing, the cars' short wheelbases and their drivers' enormous helmets giving the action a unique look as they zoom around the tracks. With custom championships and modding support, we could see the birth of a new casual racing champ.

PLAYED IT



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

Large chunks of the demo are off-limits, the full game promises to be more open.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Christoph Schultz

PUBLISHER
Christoph Schultz

LINK
s.team/a/2288530

A PRETTY BROKEN ADVENTURE

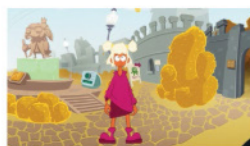
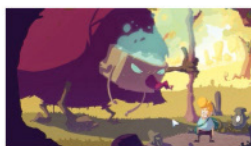
Videogaming's triumphant return to the lavatory

This looks a bit like *Day of the Tentacle*, and that's a good thing. The demo drops you into its world after the game has got going, and has a recap of the events you haven't played yet to bring you up to speed with its world. It's a neat way to approach a demo.

PLAYED IT

The idea is that back in 1997 three friends found a weird console game cart which subsequently broke, and when they tried to fix it a portal appeared. Of course they stepped through, and ended up in three different places, one of which looks suspiciously similar to the game that was on the cart.

It's a wonderfully colourful world, alive with little details such as the stonepecker bird that makes its nest in the style of the local architecture, or the bar full of creatures you'll spend some time looking at before you think to click on the barman (or barfish, it's a koi carp) to interact. All of them are called Jeff.



JEFF STRANDING

The parallels with Schafer and Grossman's work continue with a puzzle that involves toilets. There's no time travel here (at least, not yet – the demo is very short so it's completely possible it'll feature in the finished game), but with multiple characters split across different environments we'll surely see some sort of interaction between them, even if it isn't a Chron-O-John.

While the LucasArts echoes are clear, this is an adventure that stands on its own. The writing, in particular, is a standout, though there are no voices in the demo version so you're left clicking through each line of dialogue as you read. Demo character Lani breaks the fourth wall on one occasion, but otherwise is restricted

to asking questions about her environment and giving characters the information they need. Repeated conversations are well handled, with lines changing to 'remind me about...' to signify you've already asked.

Likewise, the point-and-click interface is nicely thought out, with right and left mouse buttons used to look at and interact, with different symbols appearing as you mouse over an object. Hold Space, and all interactive hotspots are highlighted, so you never need to be searching every pixel for an overlooked verb.

Developer Christoph Schultz has stated he intends *APBA* to be "a classic point-and-click with a modern twist. No pixel hunting, no moon logic – just plenty of heart, humour, and tons of '90s vibes." And from the demo showing he's succeeded. While the puzzle involving multiple toilet cubicles is a head-scratcher, you're provided with all you need to solve it before you enter the room, and it's a matter of understanding the clues, without a rubber chicken in sight. This could be great.

BACK IN 1997 THREE FRIENDS FOUND A WEIRD CONSOLE GAME CART



This shot could be straight out of *Syndicate*, another near-future corporatocracy.



EXEKILLER

Hunt fugitives in a world of constant sunset

A post-apocalyptic Staten Island is the setting for this first-person adventure, which casts you as a bounty hunter in the service of the Helion Corporation. If that sounds like *Blade Runner*, then the visuals back up the association, with the kinds of flying cars, hand cannons, neon signs and orange sunsets dreamed up for the

2049 movie. There are hints of *Mad Max* and *Fallout* on display too, especially as the protagonist rocks up to a desert dwelling in the game's trailer, putting on a hat and pulling a revolver as he approaches the door.

There's a lot of the Old West in *ExeKiller*, a thick seam of retrofuturism that extends to a handheld motion tracker that looks like an old transistor radio. Details like the ammo counters on the guns themselves help to draw you into *ExeKiller's* world, and the way time slows during gunfights and environmental kills (such as electricity from a malfunctioning vending machine)

FIRST LOOK

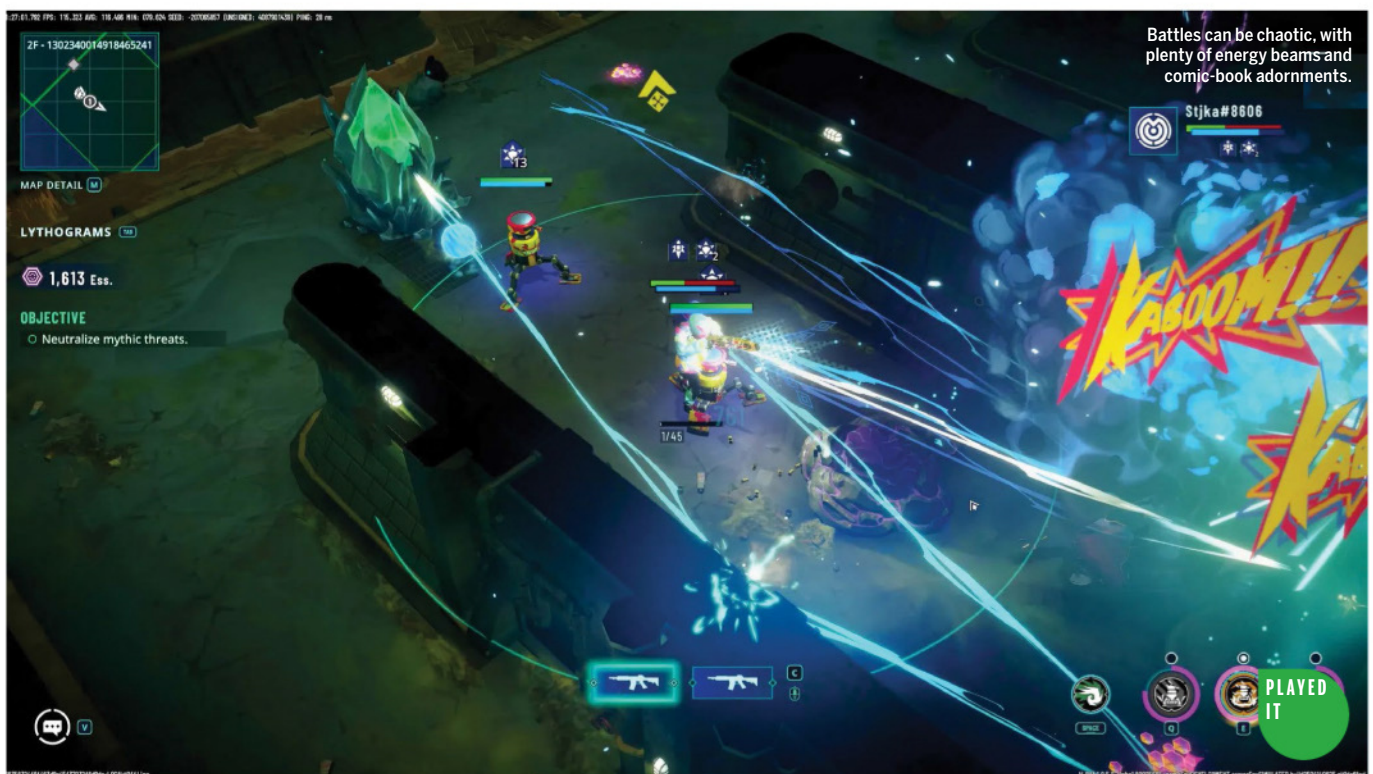
can be used to take down fugitives flag this as a potentially very interesting addition to the adventure-shooter genre.

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Paradark Studio

PUBLISHER
Null Games

LINK
s.team/a/1701840



Battles can be chaotic, with plenty of energy beams and comic-book adornments.

RIFTSTORM

Team up to plug holes in reality, with guns

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Confiction Labs, Agate

PUBLISHER
Confiction Labs

LINK
s.team/a/2282790

A co-op looter-shooter that promises you can play solo as well, *Riftstorm* casts you as an operative of the Mythic Protocol, an

organisation that attempts to regulate the unknown and the secret societies that work within it.

This means a lot of shooting as you aim to

protect the world from threats it can't understand and should never actually be aware of, closing the rifts through which they flood our plane.



DiscoUnty

Out 21st August 2025

STEAM® NINTENDO SWITCH PS5 PS4
XBOX SERIES X|S XBOX ONE

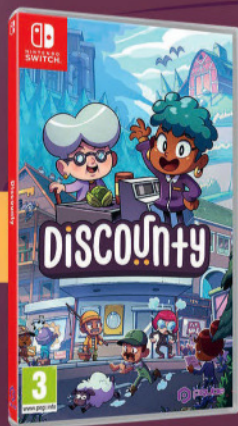
CRINKLE
CUTE
GAMES

PAJUBO



Manage your own discount supermarket!

Get caught up in small-town drama, organise and plan your shop's layout, and strike lucrative trade deals as you expand your secretive aunt's business empire. Selling more frozen fries will surely heal this broken community...right?



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XBOX SERIES X S XBOX ONE



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COVER FEATURE

007 First Light



FROM
DENMARK
WITH
LOVE

Bond is back for his most ambitious
virtual adventure yet in **007 FIRST LIGHT**

By Rick Lane

007 First Light

James Bond returns to videogames, and about bloody time. It's been 13 years since Ian Fleming's Scottish superspy last infiltrated gaming's bubbling volcano base. And if we're talking about good Bond games, there's a chance you weren't born when the last one came out. *GoldenEye 007* is nearly 30 years old and has aged like Roger Moore in *A View to a Kill*, while every virtual Bond escapade since has ranged from aggressively mediocre to outright duff.

But with *007 First Light*, there's hope things will be different. This time, Bond has a handler with proven espionage credentials – IO Interactive. In its brilliant *World of Assassination* trilogy, the *Hitman* developer has already built what seems like the perfect template for a modern Bond experience; games about exploring glitzy locales through sophisticated social stealth, thrumming with the potential to explode into violence.

As it turns out, however, *First Light* won't be a straightforward *Hitman* clone. IO Interactive has bigger plans than that. "Our ambition was to make a game that truly puts the player in Bond's shoes, emotionally as well as functionally," says Martin Emborg, narrative and cinematic director on *First Light*. "[It's] a full spectrum experience where the player of course will engage in his particular brand of spectacular action, but crucially also his quintessential wits and charm."

Indeed, it's better to think of *First Light* less as *Hitman* with cars and gadgets, and more as IO's equivalent of *Indiana Jones & The Great Circle*. Like MachineGames' adventure, *First Light* draws upon the specific experience and design philosophy of its developer, but the game is ultimately built its central character rather than trying to force him into a specific mould.

OO TRAINING

Before we can understand what that game is, first we must understand who IO's Bond is. Unlike Indiana Jones, portrayals of Bond have shifted considerably over the decades, with significant gulfs between the stoic,

ruthless MI6 agent depicted in Fleming's novels, Connery's effortlessly suave spy, Moore's tongue-in-cheek portrayal, and the harder edge of the Craig era.

Yet rather than adopt any existing interpretation as most videogames have done in the past, IO chose to come up with its own version of Bond. "While the team obviously did a lot of homework with the books movies and comic-book adaptations, this is a brand new depiction of the character," Emborg says.

Naturally, elements of IO's Bond will be recognisable from other sources, such as the novels. "Fleming's books are pivotal source material for creating an origin story that is true to the character," Emborg explains. "Our clearest nod to the books is the three-inch vertical scar on his cheek, which has not been present in the movie adaptations."

But there's also a big difference from most previous depictions of Bond – his age. IO's Bond is 26 years old during the events of *First Light*, and yet to receive his 00 licence. I asked why they opted for a youthful, inexperienced Bond. "Choosing a younger Bond allowed us to explore his transformation into the iconic 007 and give players a more personal, vulnerable version of the character, someone who is more relatable than the ultimate spy," Emborg says. "It lets players experience his evolution, which is compelling and emotionally resonant in a game format."

Moreover, a younger Bond offers a better parallel to the player's own journey through the game, with him learning his own skillset alongside the player. "This version of Bond has all the core qualities we know and love, but they haven't been refined by experience yet," Emborg says. "He is still finding his place and purpose, a diamond in the rough."

Emborg says that telling an origin story with a younger Bond "quickly emerged as the strongest creative direction", and has been one of the driving forces behind the game since early on in the concepting stage. IO also acknowledges the direction comes with some creative risk. Bond's pre-007 years have generally been kept at arm's length from the audience, with only vague allusions to his childhood and adolescence and fleeting glimpses of his ascension through MI6, such as in the opening of 2006's *Casino Royale*.



KNOW
YOUR
BOND

JOHN GREENWAY

Played by Lennie James, Greenway's role within MI6 is unspecified. But scenes from the reveal trailer imply he acts in a mentor role to Bond.

“OURS IS A NEW TAKE,
NOT ABOUT THE
SEASONED MAN
OF MYSTERY”



Hence, does exposing Bond's origins risk undermining the mystique at the heart of the character? Emborg says the goal of *First Light* “isn't to explain everything”, but to “be on that journey” with Bond. “Ours is a new take, not about the seasoned man of mystery, but about the young man that'll become that man,” he says.

MISSION BRIEFING

As for what form this origin story will take, *First Light* sees Bond on a mission in pursuit of 009, a rogue

ABOVE: Ah, so THAT's how the Greeks made all those statues.

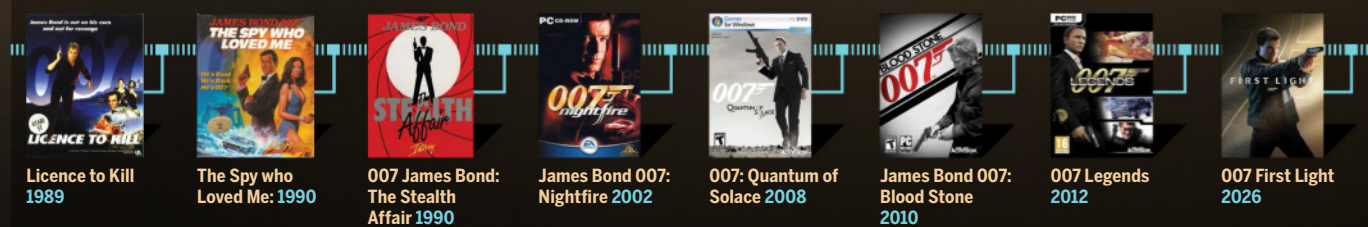
agent described as a “master manipulator” in the game's debut trailer. Emborg explains that the overarching story is “linear, with a carefully crafted plot and character journey in the tradition of the greatest Bond adventures”.

IO won't detail why it chose 009 as the primary antagonist for *First Light*, as opposed to a more traditional Bond villain in the style of Auric Goldfinger or Ernst Blofeld. But the studio does comment on how it has conceived other key characters who orbit around Bond. “We approached them

all as having an impact on shaping who Bond will become, Emborg says. “Each legacy character is reimagined to reflect and challenge different aspects of Bond's rookie qualities.”

One example is Q. Emborg states that IO's portrayal of Q “actually hews very closely to the classic portrayal”. But since the pair have no existing relationship at the game's outset, there's one big difference. “He's nice to Bond, and trusts him with his gadgets without a second thought,” Emborg points out. “Let's see how long that lasts.”

BOND ON PC 007's history with videogames is a bit odd, but his relationship with the PC is very unusual



“ANY GIVEN
CHALLENGE CAN BE
SOLVED IN MANY
DIFFERENT WAYS”



ABOVE: *Forza Horizon 6* is shaping up nicely.

One of the most important characters after Bond in *First Light*, however, is Moneypenny. She'll play a far more prominent role in *First Light* than in any of the films, acting as Bond's guide and advisor on missions. "Moneypenny is much more front and centre than she's ever been before, being the one in Bond's earpiece," Emborg says. Moreover, having Moneypenny as a more constant presence also allows IO to develop their relationship. "Their chemistry is just fantastic, the two complementing each other so well, but of course completely differently from the books and the films in most respects."

Moneypenny won't be the only major female character in *First Light*, either. There are several others depicted in the trailer, including one who appears to be in an M role, and another that seems poised to be a romantic interest.

I asked IO how it was approaching the subject of romance and Bond's relationship with female characters. IO didn't reply

specifically to the former, simply stating that it is "crafting an original, modern Bond adventure that remains true to everything that makes the series and enduring classic". Regarding the latter, Emborg explained, "In *007 First Light* female characters are written as fully realised, complex individuals, often with more experience than him. They have agency, ambition and make an impact on Bond's arc."

THE SPY WHO BLUFFED ME

This is how IO plans to approach *First Light* from a story and character perspective. But how will *First Light* play? Will we see the same kinds of detailed, highly dynamic sandboxes IO crafted for *Hitman's World of Assassination* trilogy? Or will *First Light* follow the more conventional route of a linear action adventure, as other Bond games have in the past?

According to gameplay director Andreas Krogh, the answer is *First Light* will include a combination of the two. "We are talking about the game as a 'breathing' gameplay

loop," he says. "The idea is that we are doing a narrative driven action-adventure game where we blend IOI's open-ended level design with set-piece-driven storytelling, so sometimes we narrow in on the story, and sometimes we open up into core gameplay areas with freedom of approach."

These core areas will be where *First Light* most closely resembles *Hitman*. "[They] will definitely have multiple distinct paths," Krogh says. "You will still feel the creative opportunity space IOI is known for, with environment interactions, AI manipulation and gadgets." These areas will have a "forward momentum driving incentive", such as an objective you need to get to. "But the space itself is open, and any given challenge can be solved in many different ways," Krogh points out.

Krogh also points emphasises that spycraft is at the heart of *First Light*, with Bond able to make his way through these open areas without alerting security. That said, players

GADGET MAN

We take a stab at deducing the how Bond's new gizmos work



DARTPHONE

This smartphone turns people into mindless, soporific husks, making it exactly like all other smartphones, but this one does it with darts.



MISSILE PEN

This ballistic ballpoint fires miniature missiles. It isn't clear whether the missiles explode or have some other function, however.



BLAST DEVICE

We've no description for how these earpods function. Presumably, they emit some kind of disorienting shockwave or a disabling EMP.



SMOKE DEVICE

This cigarette lighter has the descriptor "smoke devices". This isn't helpful since all lighters are smoke devices, but this one works more like a smoke grenade.



That's some fine lookin' liquor.



Tragically, this is now an AirBnB.

KNOW
YOUR
BOND

MONEYPENNY

Money Penny's role in *First Light* is that of Bond's remote handler, providing him with real-time intelligence updates, advice and general support through his earpiece.

shouldn't expect Bond to play like Agent 47 with a full head of hair. They're very different characters, and as such have diverging approaches to infiltration, evasion, and combat.

One of the most important differences is that Agent 47 is a master of disguise, able to slip into an array of identities to move freely around a space undetected. Bond, by contrast, rarely hides who he is, and so relies more on evasion and distraction when sneaking around.

But on top of this, Bond can use his personality like a disguise, able to charm his way into restricted areas and out of a guard's suspicions when detected. "We made sure bluffing is directly built into the toolset that Bond has," Krogh says. "This feature gives the player more options to creatively overcome various obstacles or get out of a hairy situation if spotted in an inopportune moment."

While players can explore much of *First Light* in a sneaky mode, Bond doesn't rely on stealth as heavily as Agent 47 does. He can also approach objectives in a more

direct fashion, relying on his fighting skills to see him through.

To this end, IO has built its own free-flow combat system in the vein of Rocksteady's *Arkham* games, with Bond able to take on groups of henchmen in close-quarters fisticuffs. This system is designed to be scrappier and more improvisational than Batman, however. "We wanted a style where it feels like Bond is using whatever is at his disposal to take down the enemy," Krogh says. "So you can of course slam enemies into a wall or a toilet or throw enemies into each other or over a railing."

Melee combat is also designed to flow seamlessly into ranged combat (more on this later), while Bond can also deploy his gadgets during CQB sequences. "If players want Bond to knock on the front door and start kicking up a fuss, he can definitely do that," Krogh summarises.

On the subject of gadgets, this is a feature that proved surprisingly tricky for IO to implement. "There are so many factors that go into this. What does spyecraft look like today?"



GUARDS

One lingering question is how guard AI will function in *First Light*? Will stealth be divided between restricted and open areas, or will *First Light* also feature more suspicious guards like *Hitman*?

INFORMATION

Bond's charm is as much a part of his arsenal as gadgets and guns, and that information desk looks like an ideal place to put that to use.

➤ What feels undeniably 'Bond' What is fun to use? What fits well with moment-to-moment gameplay?" Indeed, while gadgets are a central part of the Bond experience, Bond will typically use each gadget once in a specific situation. But a game demands gadgets that are consistently useful.

For *First Light*, IO aimed to create gadgets that were "more than just

gimmicks" delivering a consistent, tangible impact upon play. "We wanted each gadget to feel practical, grounded, but fun and replayable to fit as many areas as possible," Krogh says. "We also wanted them to feel distinct from each other, both visually and practically, so each have their own purpose."

Consequently, most gadgets will have multiple uses. Take, for

example, Bond's wristwatch, which can disable electronics and bypass security systems when you're sneaking about. But it also has a laser function that can disarm enemies and slice through locks, and the ability to fire a dart that can distract guards or knock them out directly. "All in all, they should give the player a broad list of tools to fit [their] playstyle," Krogh says.



ENVIRONMENT
IO's reputation for dazzling environment art doesn't seem to be in any danger. Look at those marble columns, that cylindrical holographic display. I bet the ceiling is downright obscene.

BUST
Bond can utilise objects in the environment during combat. Those busts on the right look a little large for walloping someone on the head with. The one on the left, however...

**“OUR AIM IS TO
CREATE HIGH-IMPACT
SPECTACLE
SEQUENCES”**

OPEN WORLD DOMINATION

IO Interactive is in its element when playing in a sandbox, and all the creative choices here seem appropriate when tailoring *Hitman*'s template for a tuxedo fit. But what of those more linear, action-focused segments? “Our aim is to create high-impact spectacle sequences that players won't just remember; they'll want to replay them again and again,”

Krogh says. “Whether it's a daring escape, a perfectly timed explosion, or a dramatic close-quarters encounter, we want each set-piece to feel uniquely Bond.”

A noble ambition. But IO is on less firm ground here. The studio's games have historically suffered when pressed into a linear action mould. *Hitman: Absolution* felt inescapably limited after the brilliantly crafted

sandboxes of *Blood Money*, while the *Kane & Lynch* duology were middling cover shooters at best. Even the *World of Assassination* trilogy falls onto its weaker foot when pulling out a gun, so how exactly does IO plan to give *First Light* the spectacle the series is known for?

For starters, Krogh points out that the clumsiness in the *World of Assassination*'s gunplay was at least



“IN HITMAN WE VIEWED RANGED COMBAT AS A LAST RESORT”

KNOW YOUR BOND

Q

Q supplies the ingenious gadgets for Bond to use on missions. IO says he's fairly affable toward Bond in *First Light*, mainly because 007 hasn't been able to wreck any of his stuff yet.

» partly deliberate. “In *Hitman* we viewed ranged combat as a last resort for most players, which made it fairly hard and for most players something they wanted to avoid,” he says. “This time around we have a character that invites ranged combat to be a viable option.”

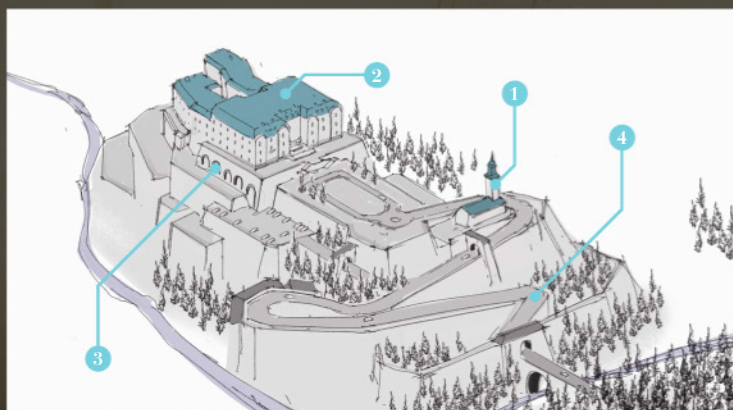
Consequently, Krogh says that IO “set a challenge” for itself. “The aim has been to create the best weapon-handling we have done to date,” he says. “First and foremost we wanted to create a great system both mechanically and technically, but we also wanted it to feel dynamic, fluid and responsive.”

Part of this is how Bond can seamlessly transition from stealth to combat, and also between ranged and melee combat. For example, if Bond empties a weapon of ammo and cannot reload, he can throw the gun at enemies to knock them off balance, giving him a window to find another weapon, use a gadget, or close the gap between them. Alongside giving the more action-focused parts of *First Light*



MISSION QUITE POSSIBLE

Which way into the Chateau?



1 CHAPEL

This Chapel seems like a good scouting spot from which to commence a Bond infiltration, although there's not much cover between it and the rest of the castle.

2 CHATEAU

The Chateau is presumably where the main bubble of the mission takes place, and there are shades of *Hitman's* Paris Showstopper mission in how its set within one building.

3 ARCHES

While Bond can take the direct path through missions, this route along the arches of the Chateau suggests there may be one or several ways through the back.

4 ROAD

This road down from the chapel seems well suited to a car chase to cap off a Bond mission, and we wouldn't be surprised if that's how Bond makes his speedy escape.

the inherent satisfaction they require, IO also hopes such fluidity will make being spotted during stealth feel less like a failure on the part of the player, and more like a natural part of the game. "The aim is that even if you try to stealth and things go wrong, you will just handle the situation slightly different than what you set out to do, but you will still have a very satisfying experience shooting your way through," Krogh says.

It's also worth noting that not all the linear segments will be shooting galleries. Some of them will involve driving vehicles, another hallmark of Bond that IO wants to include. Krogh doesn't go into much detail about how vehicles will be used, but says the vehicle sections will include "high-stakes interludes, thrilling chases, tense escapes, or confrontations in motion". These are tricky to get right in a game that isn't specifically about vehicles, though as *Uncharted 4* shows, when they are done right, they can be the best part of the game.

ABOVE: Bond's not above a bit of crouch-walking.

LAST LIGHT

Clearly, *First Light* has a lot of moving parts, and it's hard to judge precisely how it will all come together without playing the game directly. Yet while IO Interactive doesn't provide too much detail about the specifics of *First Light's* adventure, Krogh does break down the mission depicted in the game's trailer, to shed some light on how its sandboxes and action set-pieces combine.

In what appears to be an early mission in *First Light*, Bond travels to a castle in Slovakia to rendezvous with 009. "At the start, Bond is merely present as a lookout, but his instincts kick in and take him on an investigation within the castle," Krogh says. Bond can infiltrate the castle in several ways, trying to bluff his way past security, using his gadgets to his advantage, or exploring the environment to find an alternative point of entry.

Once inside the castle, Krogh says players will have "full agency to proceed as they see fit, whether that is by using bluff, using their gadgets,

using stealth and traversal, [or using] combat". The mission culminates in a linear set-piece "with a massive gunfight where Bond has to take on his enemies through melee and ranged combat before making it to the aeroplane he was chasing".

This sounds like an ideal blend of the style of game IO is known for, and the extra pizzazz a Bond experience needs. In contrast to games like *Hitman: Absolution*, IO is building the linear elements on top of its established legacy, as opposed to contradicting the ideas that made its games special.

Some of the creative choices IO has made for *First Light* may not be the easiest or most obvious. But this was also true for *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*, and it was a similarly multifaceted, character-driven design that led MachineGames to create one of the best licensed games in recent memory. Hence, on paper, there is no reason why Bond can't join Dr Jones in a virtual renaissance for cinema's greatest action heroes. ■

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HOUSE OF FURY

Speaking to indie publishing powerhouse **RAW FURY**'s CEO Pim Holfve about the key to its success

By Daniella Lucas

It's been ten years since Raw Fury signed its first game and started its journey to becoming a publisher known for its wide range of indie hits. After being founded by ex Paradox mobile vice-president Jonas Antonsson and EA Dice's Gordon Van-Dyke, with its first release, *Kingdom*, dropping in 2015, the company has continued to grow and be responsible for the likes of *Blue Prince*, *Cassette Beasts* and *Moonstone Island*.

Instead of specialising in a particular genre, Raw Fury has mastered the art of finding great games and supporting them no matter what type they are. But what is it that helps make the publisher and its games so successful? PC Gamer spoke to Raw Fury's CEO Pim Holfve to find out.

"We have a great value foundation," Holfve tells me. "We're not driven by greed, but the passion for actually getting the right games out on the market. The games that we see deserve to exist more than anything, and are we the right kind of people to judge that? Yes, from our perspective I would say so."

Holfve may have only joined the company this year, but it's clear he's incredibly excited about the publisher and what makes Raw Fury so special. "I've never met a team that loves the company this much," he shares. "It's not just a company, this is really like a passion driven beast in the most positive way because it's like everyone is here because they want to work with indie titles. People want to work at a value-based company like ours and it's pure joy doing the best we can with a smaller scale. We have people from all over the industry and some have been in triple-A, some have

been in mobile etc, but they land here because it's Raw Fury and I think that is a great achievement."

So how does all that passion translate to the games? With so many of them over so many genres – what ties them all together? "We have an extremely diverse catalogue of games, and I think that was one of the first things I had to wrap my head around – to find a common thread throughout," Holfve tells me. "We need to be able to see how we can cross-pollinate all these games so we found a system to do that – not by genres, because that makes no sense, but more on how people should feel when they play a game – so we've identified four main 'feels' for Raw Fury games."

"The first one being 'feel smart' – that's your kind of puzzle game or things that you have to solve. We also have 'feel good' – that's your cosy-style games. Then, of course, 'feel fear' – so horror games, but also anything that can make you feel terrified. Finally we have 'feel invincible' – which can be anything where you feel that you are competing or that you're winning."

"So those are a way for us to talk about games and talk about the motivation of the players. It's kind of retrofitting a portfolio that's been built up over ten years, but it's a really good way to talk to developers and also internally about the games, what they're supposed to do, how they're going to affect the players, etc."

COMPANY PRIDE

For a company that prides itself on its passion, breaking things down into feelings is a great way to categorise them as you instantly know what you want a game to do. But how did it reach them? "I had a lot of conversations with people internally and some of the developers, and then that kind of just materialised with

Raw Fury

way more feels. And then it's like, okay, can we boil this down? Because otherwise it's going to be unbearable. But one game is not just one feel, though. So it can be like 80% feel smart and then 20% feel invincible, for example."

But with Raw Fury publishing so many games, how does the team go about applying that philosophy to the games they choose to support? "I think this is where the 'feels' come in," Holfve says. "We can look historically where we have been good, but also to understand the target audience and what actually triggers them. We try to find a good mix with games that we have in the portfolio already that we could leverage to build an audience for future games and vice versa. If we can have titles that also complement or can drive new players to older games, that's a win-win. That is part of the promise that we have to developers, that even the ones we signed ten years ago we'll try to make the most of the game – not just at release. It's a lifelong relationship for us."

Looking at the upcoming *Region Of Ruin: Runegate*, you can see the influences of Raw Fury's first supported game – *Kingdom*. By sharing some common DNA, both games will benefit. That approach has worked well for the last ten years for the publisher, but what will the next decade of Raw Fury look like?

"Pretty much the same... but different," Holfve laughs. "I think what intrigues me the most right now are the games that are being created in other regions. I was at Gamescom Latam for the first time and it was the most inspiring game show I've ever been to. I met a lot of developers and you could really really feel the passion in that region. I think that there's going to be more of an exchange globally of games where things have been more segmented before. Although saying that, 10% of our portfolio is from Latin America today, but I foresee that there's going to be more games from that region and from other areas as well."

CONNECTING GAMES

Games such as *Zet Zillions*, made by OTA IMON Studios, and *Dandara*, from Long Hat House – both from Brazil – are just a few of Raw Fury's games that are testament to that vision. "I think our ambition as a publisher is to be an even better partner for indie developers," Holfve tells us. "We're trying to figure out how we can do that, and one of those things is that we have been extremely developer-focused, which we will continue, but we have to be more player-focused. Connecting games with players is our mission, and if we don't know where the players are we're not going to be the best partner. So deep diving into that and understanding players even more by trying to find ways that guide us in a better way. So new ways of trying to identify player behaviour and player wants beyond just looking at, oh it's a first-person shooter, etc."



ABOVE: Raw Fury's office dog, Ponyo.

LEFT: Company CEO Pim Holfve.

BOTTOM: Raw Fury's office in Stockholm.

The industry has faced a lot of tough moments over the last two years, with big companies laying off thousands of people at a time after trying to cash in during the COVID-era gaming boom. However, smaller companies like Raw Fury are demonstrating the complete opposite by holding onto their principles.

"I think the core of publishing is connecting fantastic games with the right players, and that is also a craft, and it's really really difficult if you don't know how to do it," he says. "So the one positive outcome of the dreadful years that we've had, is that there are a lot of games in the making with great people – I just want to

make sure that they don't get snatched up by greedy people, but that they team up with people who can help to bring the games to the market. So my advice to the powers of 'evil' is please don't try to rush things back to where they were, because right now we are healing as an industry, and I think good games and teams can flourish if they don't get stressed by greed."

The gaming industry could do with more publishers like Raw Fury that stick to their core values. Creating a space where developers can make the best versions of their games thanks to the right support leads to success. ■



1

ESOTERIC EBB

All the craziness of a real D&D campaign – be as heroic or as stupid as you like

RELEASE TBA DEVELOPER Cristoffer Bodegard



The city of Norvik is about to hold its first ever election and a local tea shop has just exploded. Is there a connection? Find out as you step into the role of The Cleric – a glorified government goon – as you attempt to figure out what happened before everyone casts their votes.

A CRPG with strong *Disco Elysium* influences, you'll need to talk to the citizens of Norvik and explore the area to get to the bottom of why the tea shop was destroyed by dealing with devils, zombies and the other fantasy creatures who call the city their home.

Your fate is controlled through dice rolls based on your vital stats – Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma... who also happen to be voices in your head helping (and sometimes hindering) your choices. It's a really neat mechanic and makes for some intriguing builds for your cleric. You could have plenty of strength, but if you have low

intelligence that voice might give you bad info. Like any real Dungeons & Dragons campaign there's scope for feats of greatness and saving the day, but you can also derail your campaign entirely by going full stupid with it. You could try solving the mystery of the burned-down tea shop, or you could just bumble about town getting into fights with seagulls and touching things you shouldn't.

Even the tiny slice of the game I saw was packed with lots of different things I could do, like fighting a zombie or touching a cursed corpse and almost killing yourself yet again. With the promise of a full city to explore I can't wait to see what kinds of mischief are possible on release.

THERE'S SCOPE FOR FEATS OF GREATNESS AND SAVING THE DAY



1 LITTLE GUYS

Norvik is full of all sorts of races that you'd find in D&D – like this cheeky kobold. Each one has their own way of life and political leanings for the upcoming election.

2 THE CLERIC

Dressed a bit like a knight from Monty Python, The Cleric never removes his helmet. You can swap it out to show off just how unfashionable you can get though.

3 BIG TALK

Conversations get delightfully weird and your success at negotiation depends on your dice rolls. Time also passes as you talk so keep an eye on the clock.



CRAFTLINGS

'90s-inspired tactics combine with crafting to solve levels

RELEASE TBA DEVELOPER Ariano Games

If you're old enough to remember *Lemmings* then you'll have a good idea of how this game works already. Steer a little group of adorable but mindless little guys around an area and teach them how to survive. In *Craftlings*' case that involves getting them to gather resources and build a town to overcome obstacles.



It's simple premise but things can get complex quickly. You may start a level with a few axes to chop trees for wood, but eventually you're going to need a blacksmith to make more axes, and eventually a nursery to plant more trees to keep your production line going.

Unfortunately your citizens aren't very smart and will walk straight off ledges if you don't babysit them so you'll also need to build items to block them from walking straight into danger. They also can't do more than one thing at once, like climbing ladders while holding things, so you'll need to create systems to move items up and down levels to reach the right buildings. There's a lot to keep track of, but once it all comes together and

YOUR CITIZENS AREN'T VERY SMART AND WILL WALK OFF LEDGES

your peons are behaving as they should you feel like a proud parent watching on as your kids learn tasks on their own.

The level I played had me finding a way to take down a giant octopus, but the full game will have more stages and even enemies to fight. With more building types and even spells to give you more ways to approach problems as you see fit.



1 BE RESOURCEFUL

Gathering materials to craft new buildings is one thing, but getting them where they need to go is the real challenge. There are a range of tools to lift and lower things to where you want them.

2 GEAR UP

You'll need to build your settlement out a bit before you have what you need to start fighting any nasties. Here you'll need to get lumber to the right place to use the catapult.

3 DOCK

Stages have small stories and a main goal to complete – in this case you need to take down this unfriendly octopus who won't let go of your boat.

1 PERFECT TIMING

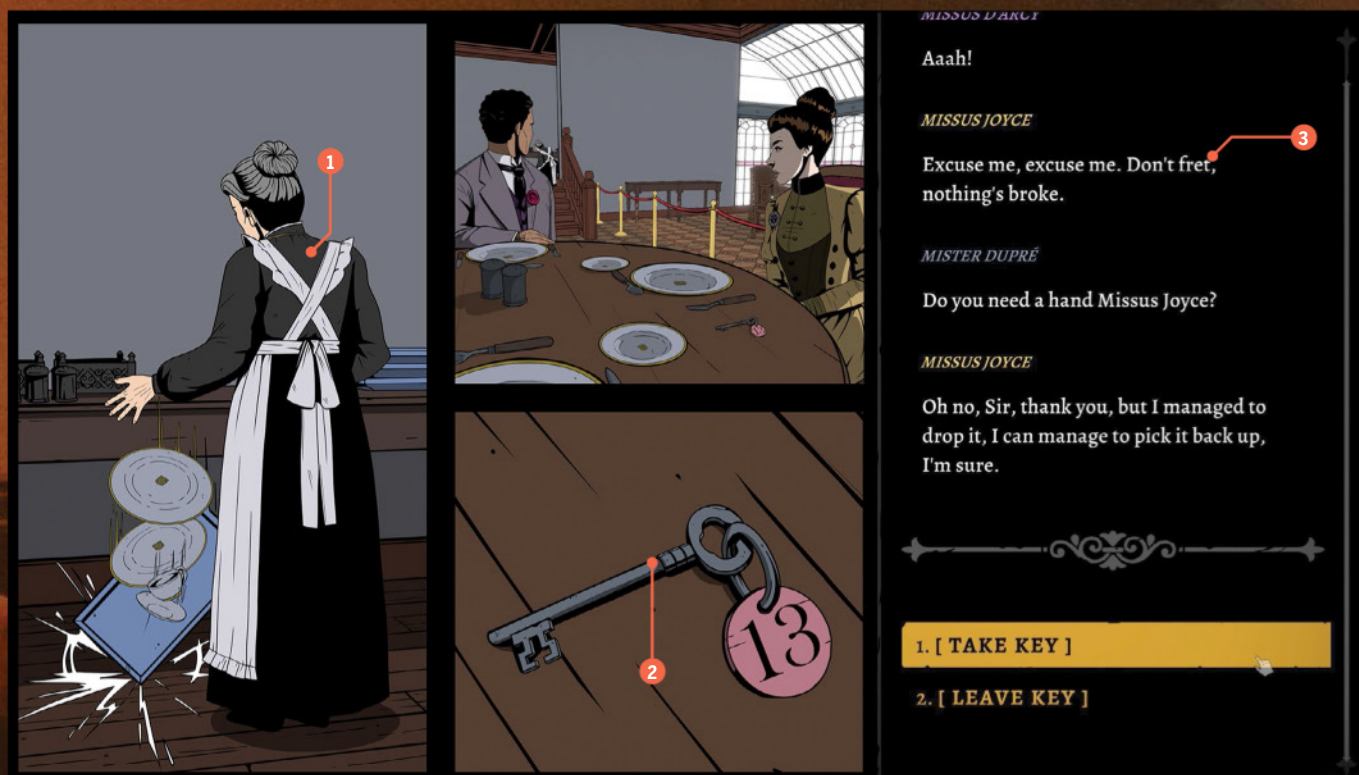
You have to work against the clock to take advantage of anything that might happen during your stay to distract people long enough to do your investigating.

2 KEY EVIDENCE

Just because something is out in the open, it doesn't always mean it's safe to interact with. If you're not careful someone might notice what you're doing and get you kicked out of the manor.

3 TALKING POINTS

The comic-book style and script-like text make the whole game feel like a mystery novel. You might want to take notes to remember key points for later.

**3****THE SEANCE OF BLAKE MANOR**

An atmospheric mystery with Irish roots makes for an amazing haunted house vibe

RELEASE TBA DEVELOPER Spooky Doorway

Evelyn Ward has disappeared at Blake Manor, a few days before a group of mystics perform a seance at Halloween in 1897. A point-and-click adventure, you play as detective Declan Ward who checks into the Blake Manor to try and find her and prevent anyone else from disappearing.



Everyone who is staying at the manor has their own reasons for being there and none of them seem innocent. You'll need to talk to people and explore the grounds as time ticks down before the main event. As you speak to the visitors you'll learn their routines so you can sneak into their rooms or play people off against each other. Be careful, if you get caught you might get kicked out of the hotel and not be able to save anyone.

You'll piece things together in your journal as you go, slotting findings together in word puzzles that you can then use against people as you interrogate them. With the clock ticking down every time you do something you'll need to choose your actions carefully.

YOU'LL PIECE THINGS TOGETHER IN YOUR JOURNAL AS YOU GO

Even at this early stage the creepy atmosphere and sense of unease about the place is perfect. The Irish setting makes for some tense vibes – the whole manor is dotted with grotesque carved pumpkins and something unnatural can be caught in brief glimpses while you explore. The art style perfectly matches its Victorian setting with illustrations and dark truths to uncover.

1 BUILD UP

Add-ons, such as fields, are just as useful as combat-ready towers as they can generate more income to buy more towers at each pit-stop you make.

2 BLOCKED

Monsters aren't your only problem, if rocks or ruins block your path your castle can get stuck and overrun. You'll need to keep your route clear to reach the end of a run.

3 MINI ME

The peon is the real brains behind everything – you'll steer them to keep everything moving along by fighting and gathering materials. You can also get extra helpers too.



MONSTERS ARE COMING! ROCK AND ROAD

Vampire Survivors meets tower defence

RELEASE TBA DEVELOPER Ludogram

Part horde survival, part tower defence, you play around as a peon protecting your moving castle from a continuous onslaught of beasts that are out for your blood. You'll need to collect materials such as stone and wood to level up your castle, as well as have a hand in the monster-slaying to keep it safe.



When you have enough resources you'll be able to add a new element to your base. You could choose a basic turret or fire-spewing statue, but there are also things like farms to boost your earnings and towers that spew out extra followers to help you in the field. There's an incredible amount of choice involved so you can cater your builds. There are also several types of castle to choose from, with different strengths that promote different play styles.

Things start out slow as monsters trickle in from the sides of the screen and you happily go about your business, but things get more and more intense as you progress and you'll have to deal with obstacles as well as baddies. In the

A CONTINUOUS ONSLAUGHT OF BEASTS OUT FOR YOUR BLOOD

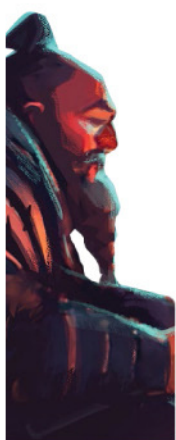
level I played I found myself quickly pulled into a state of focus as the music thumped in the background and the satisfaction of feeding stuff to my base to watch it grow and deal with ever bigger hordes became a perfect loop of gameplay. With more levels, castles and tower types promised in the final game, this is one to watch if you want to scratch that *Vampire Survivors* itch.



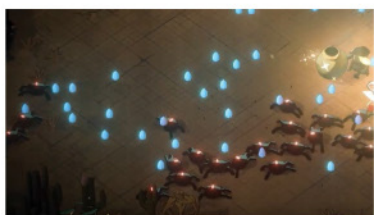
REGIONS OF RUIN: RUNEGATE

You're a dwarf restoring your own version of the Mines of Moria

RELEASE TBA DEVELOPER Gameclaw Studio



The dwarven kingdom has been destroyed by goblins and only a few of you have managed to escape through a magic portal to the remains of an ancient dwarven city. It's up to you to rebuild it by travelling to different worlds, finding supplies and recruiting new allies to your cause. Part RPG, part hack-and-



slash – you wander through pixelated landscapes, chopping down goblins and stumbling into new adventures.

Runegate is technically a sequel, but you don't need to have played *Regions Of Ruin* to enjoy this – it's its own contained story. It's much like the first game where you travel the world and build up your settlement, but everything is upgraded with prettier pixels, in-depth mechanics and more worlds to explore as well.

There are several weapon types for different fighting styles, from classic head-on axes, to more sneaky daggers and bows for distance. In the demo I played the world map already seemed huge, with more to explore in

THERE ARE SEVERAL WEAPON TYPES FOR DIFFERENT FIGHTING STYLES

the final thing. At one point I even stumbled upon a pack of friendly wolves, with a recruitable one named after Raw Fury's office dog Ponyo.

There's a lot of scope with customisation with who you recruit and how you develop your stronghold, and even how you look with loads of armour pieces scattered around the world with loads more planned for the final game.



1 OPEN SESAME

The Runegate is an ancient dwarven device that lets you travel to different worlds and civilisations where your brethren aren't on the verge of extinction like you are.

2 PEOPLE PERSON

As you travel you'll find folk to recruit for your stronghold that will open shops and other services, or even join your adventuring party for combat support.

3 HOMESTEAD

Over time you can add more buildings and citizens for your base that will help you explore further afield and open up new opportunities. Every little helps.



Q iwei 'Soulframe' Liang, game director at S-Game, has slipped away again, and when I see him next

he'll look impossibly fresh despite the Beijing summer's sweltering – some might say outright evil – 98% humidity. There's no hope of beating the heat in a 100-year-old decommissioned blast furnace, a recent Olympic venue now filled with hundreds of PCs running *Phantom Blade Zero*, which I've flown to China to play. But as I slowly sweat my way from solid to a liquid that holds the vague shape of a cotton shirt, Liang flits between interviews with just enough time to sneakily swap to a fresh black T-shirt for each one. I get it: when you're making a game this hellbent on looking cool every single second, you've gotta walk the walk.

FROM WUKONG TO WUXIA

In the November 2016 issue of PC Gamer (#298), Andy Kelly declared virtual toilets the secret to understanding the unspoken priorities of a game and the people making it. But I'd argue virtual ladders have even more to say, even about the art of looking cool – something we do not normally associate with climbing a ladder.

Consider the last ladder you approached in a game. Did it wrest away control of your character, or let you Wile E Coyote yourself right off the ledge? Could you hit a button to slide down like an action hero? Did it let you climb up the wrong side until you bonked your head, or refuse admittance altogether? All

these little things say something about how clumsy or empowered a game's makers want you to feel, which is why I immediately noticed that the protagonist of *Phantom Blade Zero* doesn't really respect ladders as, like, a concept.

By the time Soul leaps onto one he's already halfway to the top, and instead of using the rungs to climb he springs upward, barely touching every fourth step. Going down he cartwheels off the ledge into a one-handed slide, then hops off a few rungs above the ground just to showboat a bit more. Anything less flashy for even a mundane climbing animation would be a wasted opportunity to sell Liang's vision of an extravagantly motion-captured wuxia epic.

Phantom Blade Zero has the flair of a *Devil May Cry*, but I jetted over to China during a historically wet monsoon season because S-Game has broader ambitions than just character action. It's building a *Dark Souls*-lite interconnected world yet its combat explicitly doesn't crib from FromSoftware's playbook. "This was always the end goal, but it was very far away ten years ago," says Liang. "The first trailer for *Black Myth: Wukong* gave us all the confidence to move forward. Before, all we made were mobile games."

Without *Black Myth* there'd be no *Wuchang: Fallen Feathers*, no *Blood Message*. But its linear stages and boss fights felt like a first stab at a big-budget action game in a way that *Phantom Blade Zero* really doesn't. Even the small sliver of exploration in its demo has me convinced this is the game I wanted *Wukong* to be, with a full adventure backing up swordplay that absolutely rips.

G H O S T

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On the other side of the world with **PHANTOM BLADE ZERO**, a 'kungfupunk' action epic in the making

By Wes Fenlon

PHANTOM BLADE ZERO

Phantom Blade Zero

SOUL, NOT SOULS

"Nowadays there are too many *Souls* games," Liang says. His goal is to make something in the middle of straight action and labyrinthine RPG, with a map design that's still "multi-path and multi-layered". But in *Phantom Blade Zero* you don't accrue XP – power instead comes from finding new weapons and upgrades – and that means there's no *Souls*-style runback when you die.

S-Game is planning more than 30 weapons for the final game, and it's liberating to swap between them on a lark, with no stats fencing in how viable they are for your build.

"People will not understand exactly what it is until they actually play it," he says. "But this is how the gaming industry evolves – many current genres are some sort of mixture. Back in the '60s and '70s, Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, all these kung fu masters created a new genre in kung fu movies. We don't call them action movies. We call them kung fu, right? It incorporated some of Hollywood, Chinese kung fu culture, and Chinese traditional opera to make something new. So for us, our idea is to create a new subgenre [within] the RPG or action game: a kung fu action game."

Kungfupunk, that is, which means being a little bit rebellious in pulling from Chinese mythology and architecture without grounding the game in real, historical China. Liang gestures to the red threads that have been used to decorate the towering steelworks S-Game rented out to hold this preview event, which a thousand lucky players who entered a lottery via Chinese social media will attend over the weekend.

"You can recognise them as traditional Chinese puppet threads, but you can also see some visual elements of cyberpunk, just like wires. The game is about what the heart is, what the soul is, and how the soul can be taken out to leave only a husk. You can see all this as Chinese philosophy, but also as *Ghost in the Shell*, *The Matrix*."

Liang attributes his interest in blending cultures to his time studying in the US; games were "a sanctuary" as he tried to adapt to a new country and a new language. While at Yale he spent that sanctuary time tinkering with RPG Maker, and his first free, solo indie game went viral in China, racking up some four million

downloads. When he went back for a visit after graduation, the nascent Chinese game industry he caught a glimpse of seemed too good an opportunity to pass up.

When he found an investor willing to help fund a tiny studio, he packed up to move home, leaving an architecture job offer on the table in New York. After a decade in mobile, S-Game now has around 100 employees working on *Phantom Blade Zero*.

DANCE DEADLY

My first love in *Phantom Blade Zero* is *Seamless Death*, a pair of circular blades that transform Soul into a Tasmanian whirlwind of cuts with a few button taps. All of the eight weapons I can try have just a handful of combos built from normal and heavy attacks, unlike the dozens of granular combos in a Capcom or Platinum action game.

That relative simplicity seems well-judged considering how often weapons have meaningful mechanical differences. Take the Juggernaut, my eventual fave: it's a polearm with a massive blade on the end that charges up every time you parry, until it's pulsing red waiting to be unleashed in a heavy attack for extra damage. The whiplike Soft Snake Sword, the most advanced weapon in the demo, has its own unique parry that leaves you more vulnerable if you whiff but deals extra stamina damage to enemies.

Even for basic combos the animations are elaborate: Soul is constantly pirouetting between swings, rearing back on one foot to deliver a thrust, or literally bending over backwards to fling a volley of slicing blades. These animations take longer to play out than the individual, cancelable attacks in most action games, a deliberate choice to keep movements fluid. "The core thing is to bring out the Chinese martial art," says combat director Qianli Ma. "That means to a certain degree giving up the accuracy of input to bring out the fast-paced combat."

It didn't take long for me to get used to the elaborate attacks because *Phantom Blade Zero* is still plenty responsive where it needs to be: in dodges, blocks, and parries, which play into enemies' colour-coordinated special moves. Blocking a blue Brutal attack will take a huge chunk of Sha-chi (aka stamina), but parry it



Note to self: do not let anyone stick explosive red threads in your head.

"YOU CAN SEE ALL THIS AS CHINESE PHILOSOPHY, BUT ALSO AS GHOST IN THE SHELL, THE MATRIX"

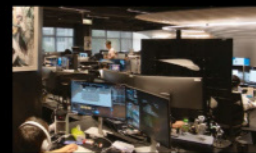
INTO S-GAME

Inside the Beijing studio



ENTRYWAY

The entryway gives off a bit of a 'colony ship preserving life off-planet' vibe.



GROWTH

S-Game has grown from a tiny indie team more than a decade ago to some 100 developers.



INFLUENCERS

Soulframe Liang watching one streamer try to beat *Phantom Blade Zero*'s latest demo.



DUCKS

What game studio is complete without collectible ducks? (Printer optional)



ABOVE: Director Soulframe Liang has recently been inspired by *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*: "This kind of game is really rare nowadays."

LEFT: S-Game's offices – roughly 82% curvier than ours.

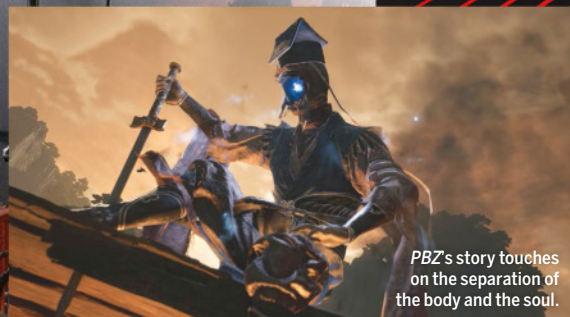




ABOVE: Liang being interviewed at the preview event.

RIGHT: PBZ's mocap director gives feedback on a performance based on the recorded animation.





PBZ's story touches on the separation of the body and the soul.

"THE WHOLE CONCEPT IS THE WUXIA, KUNG FU STYLE – YOU WANT TO DANCE"

FINDING THE GREAT WALL

How hard could it be to find the longest wall on Earth? Well...



4.05PM

I've just been dropped off at one of the most famous tourist sites in the world along with three other journalists. Entry cut-off is 4.30pm. Plenty of time! Just one problem: there's, er, no wall in sight, and the fog's closing in. After wasting 20 minutes in the car park...



4.32PM

...we learn we're two kilometres from the actual Great Wall. A taxi driver races us there. At 4.32, one ticket window's miraculously still open. We dash onto a cable car and ascend through a soup of fog. Made it! The wall dates back to the seventh century BCE, and has waited for us patiently.



4.57PM

Finally, we can say we stood on top of the Great Wall of China. We can also say we were chased off the Great Wall of China, as security decides the fog is a safety hazard and starts shooing everyone along to close it section-by-section. I have never been more damp in my entire life.

For another Wesley's perspectives on this adventure, check out Game Informer issue #371 (gameinformer.com/subscribe)

and you'll perform a stylish Ghoststep behind the enemy to lay into them. Red Killer attacks can't be blocked or parried at all, but dodging them with the same last-second timing as a parry will also trigger a Ghoststep.

The timing's easier to land than a *Sekiro* parry even on the harder Hellwalker difficulty, another deliberate choice – the more generous parry window lets an experienced player keep the action flowing like a perfectly choreographed fight scene. When you're in the flow state, it's truly hard to spot the moment Soul's animation transitions from an attack to a block or a parry into a combo.

"The whole concept is the wuxia, kung fu style – you want to dance," Ma says, explaining why the game isn't meant to be as hard as so many Soulslikes. "If you want to beat it in a mediocre, not-as-beautiful way, it's pretty achievable. But if you want to do it in a very beautiful manner, that's the difficult aspect."

FIGHT SMART AND HARD

After one run on the normal difficulty I throw myself at *Phantom Blade Zero*'s Hellwalker mode three more times to feel out how it ratchets up the action. Ma says you'll only take a bit more damage and lose a bit more sha-chi when you block, and the parry window is only two frames shorter. The more significant changes are in enemy behaviour and abilities, with bosses gaining new moves they won't throw at you on normal. "The key thing that separates the human bosses in extreme difficulty is the idea of deception."

Ma keeps a lower profile than Liang despite being a co-founder of the studio; I only learn he's at the event when I pester S-Game for an interview to dive deeper into the combat, but he shows up game to explain. When I ask about the intricacies of the AI he thinks for a moment before offering the dream reply: do I want the long answer, or the really long answer?

The demo's first miniboss, a lumbering giant named Coppermaul, doesn't have any new smarts, though he more aggressively repeats a leaping butt slam that pancakes me more than a few times. A tougher boss that S-Game showed off last year, Huangxing, was the test case for Hellwalker's smarter AI. "In normal difficulty he has some of the Soulslike

elements to him: he has fixed combos, and if you fight him enough times you'll figure out his combos," Ma says. "But in extreme difficulty, it's a completely different direction."

"We tried to borrow a concept from fighting games and incorporate it into his AI. He has a standard fighting game 'state machine,' so he will analyse the situation he's in and whether it's to his advantage or disadvantage, and that lets him do different attacks based on the situation. For example, we have a state we call 'lucky draw' where if he lands a hit he'll continue a combo, but if it doesn't hit he's gonna do something else. He tries to use the result of his last attack to determine what to do next."

Huangxing may counterattack if he manages to parry one of your hits, again inspired by the punish window in fighting games. But if you parry one of his combos, he may drop it before getting to the big finishing blow and reassess. Time will tell if smarter bosses will be more fun to fight, but I think it's a savvy pivot from the longer and longer combo chains that have come to define FromSoftware's boss fights over the last decade. After *Elden Ring*'s Malenia, it feels like that style of design has been pushed as far as it can go.

There's also a certain look to how *Souls* bosses move, partially down to the animations FromSoft frequently reuses. By comparison S-Game has proudly proclaimed that it's motion capturing professional martial artists for everything in *Phantom Blade Zero*. That's not impressive on its face – games have been doing motion capture for decades, both for cutscenes and the animations of action heroes like *Devil May Cry*'s Dante – but this is the first game I've ever seen come close to the operatic movements in films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or *A Touch of Zen*.

I see it when I parry an enemy's spear thrust by ripping it from their hands, spinning it around, and jabbing it into their chest: the whole sequence was captured by two performers working to sell the weight of every movement, down to the shuffle of their feet. The flow from one attack into the next may be a quiet revolution in game animation I'm not technically knowledgeable enough to fully

Phantom Blade Zero

deconstruct, but it impresses me the way I remember the first trailer for *Assassin's Creed* did when it showed Altaïr twisting his way through crowds of reacting NPCs.

To really get the full picture, seeing the end result in the game isn't enough. So a day after S-Game's grand preview event wraps up, we pile onto a train to make the six-hour, 1,300 kilometre high-speed rail journey to Shanghai, where a team of motion capture artists are still hard at work on the game.

I (WILL) KNOW KUNG FU

I have never interviewed anyone as expressive as S-Game's motion capture director Master Yang. He gesticulates and poses as he talks, screwing up his face in vaudevillian exaggerations to get his point across even before a translator can work through his answer.

How do you get the job of coming up with the kung fu moves behind each and every animation in the game? Apparently you start by learning martial arts at age eight, then study it at university and throw in a master's in film studies to know how to make the real thing look good on screen, too. You also, somewhat paradoxically, have to avoid thinking too much like a game designer. "We play the game outside what we're doing in the mocap studio, but [we try not to play too much] since we don't want to be restricted to one certain gameplay style, because we need to be creative with our movements and actions," Yang says.

The mocap team are already suited up and demonstrate a sequence that's not yet in the game, though later when they choreograph a fight scene I recognise a finishing move from one of the swords I used in the preview. A giant TV faces outward into the compact warehouse space, reflecting in real time the movements being captured and applied to in-game character models.

After each take the performers can walk up to it and study what worked and what didn't. The director critiques each movement: legs spread further on a heroic landing pose, torso doubled-over to better sell the impact of a hit.

"Western martial arts, like kickboxing, is very direct – it's very strong. You punch hard. Karate, jiu-jitsu, they all have their own

rhythm. Some countries' martial arts focus on harsh movements, while others focus more on soft movements. But for Chinese traditional kung fu, we balance and mix everything," he says. "When you play the game, we focus a lot on the concept of you feeling like you're dancing, and that feeling is what Chinese kung fu is about."

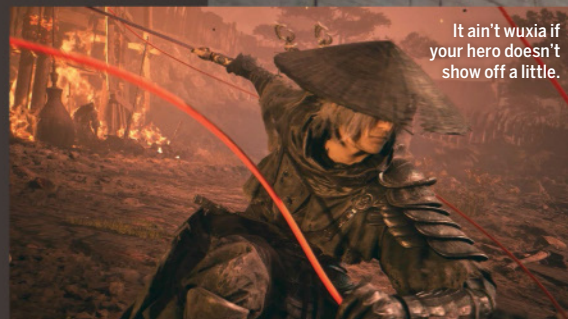
The most impressive takeaway – other than the incredible amount of physical control it takes to pull off a graceful wirework flip – is that they rarely manipulate the speed of the animations, because the end result will look uncanny. They want it all to look like real, human performance. Seeing it live gives me the same appreciation for the combat I get from '80s and '90s hand-drawn animation: the clear evidence that a person made this. In this case it just happens to be a really cool twirly assassination instead of the pencil lines on a page.

BEFORE THE FLOOD

Twenty years ago, the closest thing western PC gaming had to a wuxia action game was BioWare's *Jade Empire*, developed by a largely white development team in Canada. Even if this first wave of big-budget Chinese action games leans heavily on Soulslikes and ideas borrowed from other games, they're going to keep getting better. This is a moment they've been building towards for more than a decade, as China's gaming population has ballooned to more than 500 million players and studios have trained up on mobile.

"All the focus is on making triple-A games. You can see a lot of coming," Liang said near the end of our interview. "It's different. For Americans, it's not a new concept, because you guys are making huge games. *GTA* or something like that is quite familiar. *Black Myth: Wukong* has created this possibility for Chinese games, but I would say for most, the quality is still your basement, your foundation. Making the games better is very important."

"I think there's a pride for the gamers who played *Black Myth*, because they feel: we can make such a game. So we are careful as Chinese developers to fulfil the requirements, the hype of the Chinese gamers. We have to make the games even better." If he's sweating the challenge, it still doesn't show. ■



It ain't wuxia if your hero doesn't show off a little.

"WESTERN MARTIAL ARTS, LIKE KICKBOXING, IS VERY DIRECT – IT'S VERY STRONG"

PERFORMANCE, CAPTURED

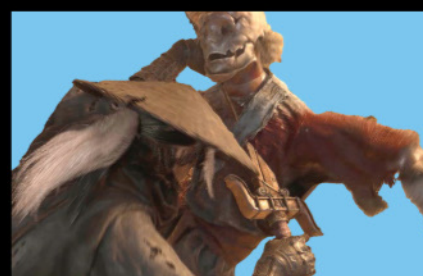
Acting out a killing blow from *Phantom Blade Zero*



1 THE REAL DEAL
Members of PBZ's mocap team show two media volunteers how to act out a grisly finisher.

2 IN-GAME FINISH

Hero Soul poised in-game just before rending flesh with the Jagged Steel sword.





ABOVE: How many PCs can you fit inside a decommissioned steel plant? A lot, it turns out, if you can stand the heat.

LEFT: Remember how cool this performer looks when one of her in-game characters is stabbing you in the face.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother, Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong, ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant, Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World, Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III, Redfall, Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends, Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World, Skull and Bones, Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic, Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4, Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring, Factorio, Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Baldur's Gate 3, Minecraft, Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Tear jerker

Chapeau to Konami, which has managed to do what many thought would be impossible – remake *Metal Gear Solid 3*, Snake's best and most memorable mission, and come out smelling of roses. *Delta's* excellent review score this issue has been incredibly enthusing for me, as I am sure it will be to any *Metal Gear Solid* fan, as it not only offers the definitive, Unreal Engine 5-powered version of the gripping, philosophical tear-jerker, but also proves that Konami can move forward with *Metal Gear Solid* as a series without Hideo Kojima at the helm.

Of course, making an entirely new adventure for Snake is next-level in terms of complexity, but if Konami can go about it in the way it has done so with *Delta*, then we all may be in line for something very special.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's heretical reviewers...



PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in
Fate, and its edges

Currently playing
Destiny 2: TEOF

This month
Wept tears of distress after playing the latest *Destiny 2* expansion. Oh Bungie...



JOSHUA WOLENS

Specialist in
Offers you can't refuse

Currently playing
Mafia: The Old Country

This month
Became the 'Don' of PC Gamer Towers. Toured the office demanding tribute in Tangfastics.



RICH STANTON

Specialist in
Hiding in bushes

Currently playing
Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater

This month
Was found barechested in the local park hunting squirrels. Don't ask.



ABBIE STONE

Specialist in
Unbridled rage

Currently playing
Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound

This month
Discovered that Greggs was out of Sausage, Bean & Cheese Melts.

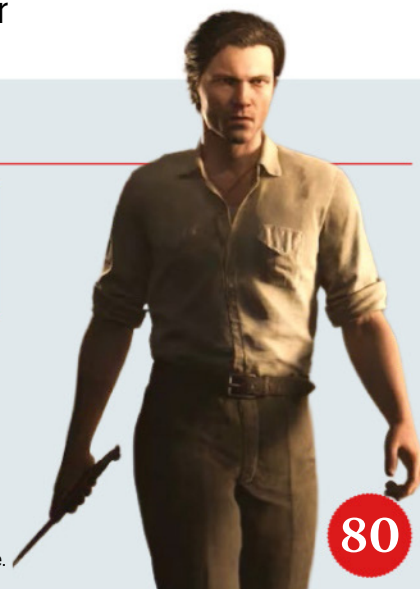


MATT ELLIOTT

Specialist in
Sucking

Currently playing
Vampyr

This month
Shoved a ruler in his mouth and became Count Mattula, the one-toothed vampire.



SNAKE REHEATER

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER is an excellent remake of a classic game

By Rich Stanton

From the moment you load up *Metal Gear Solid Delta* to when the credits roll, Hideo Kojima hangs over the production like The Sorrow, a long-dead member of the villainous Cobra Unit. The Sorrow's emotion is sadness. The melancholy of lost camaraderie, and the scars of the battlefield that never leave. Yet the character is presented as a prankster. Like a jilted lover, The Sorrow's defining characteristic is much simpler: he just can't let go.

Metal Gear Solid Delta has been a long time coming and, you'd think, has been the subject of some truly tortuous soul searching at Konami HQ. *Metal Gear* remains the company's biggest series yet one that, until 2023's *Master Collection*, it seemed scared to touch, let alone move forward.

Delta's inspiration is obvious: Capcom has made a fortune with its excellent *Resident Evil* remakes, simultaneously paying homage while making them feel new again. But where Capcom's remakes are bold, *Metal Gear Solid Delta* is utterly faithful, even devoted. The opening cutscene plays out with the original credits intact. Every time something happened in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, it happens again in *Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater*. It looks a hell of a lot better, of

course, but most of us really have been here before.

SNAKES AND DAGGERS

We've been US special forces operative Naked Snake, airdropped into a jungle in Soviet territory. We've gone on Snake's initial mission to extract Nikolai Sokolov, an alt-history version of Sergei Korolev, before things spiral into an

existential battle against his mentor The Boss, her Cobra Unit of elite soldiers, and the doomsday weapon Sokolov has been forced to build.

Metal Gear Solid 3 is by some distance the most straightforward and self-contained story in the series: positively restrained next to the wild digressions of *MGS2* and Bacchanal excess of *MGS4*. There's a reason that this is the one *Metal Gear* game

**I began
throwing live
snakes at
guards for
a laugh**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A ground-up remake of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, widely considered the best game in the series

EXPECT TO PAY
£70

DEVELOPER
Konami

PUBLISHER
Konami

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-12400,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes, but it's arriving as
a post-launch update

LINK
konami.com/
mg/mgs3r

everyone likes. Even when characters start wanging on about the Philosophers' Legacy and going on digressions that would put a Bond villain to shame, Snake's master-student dynamic with the Boss is kept front and centre.

That's the strange thing about *Metal Gear*. I can get as highfalutin about this game's narrative as you like, but the first time I realised I was really enjoying *Delta* was when I got dumped in a cave, could barely see, and proceeded to crawl around while stabbing half a dozen crabs. Snake was hungry, the crabs tasted good, and I was waiting for my in-game eyes to adjust to the darkness.

The first few hours are underwhelming. This game looks absolutely spectacular, but after the intro you go through a few sparsely populated locations, listen to a lot of codec calls, and it all feels... rather small, somehow. Again and again throughout *Delta* I wished Konami did a little more, had more ambition in how it approached this remake, but as I played I became reconciled to the faithful nature of the project. Take Snake's eyes adjusting in the darkness: it's one detail among a thousand that, even if you've played the original game multiple times, somehow delights again.

STEP ON THE GRASS!

I spent the opening feeling that these environments were too trammelled, and then rediscovered the depth. I began throwing live snakes at guards for a laugh, leaving saucy magazines out in the open, and religiously wearing a crocodile hat every time I went in the water. I stopped sprinting through these lush corridors and started luxuriating in them, as the joy of the jungle's endless options washed over me once more.

A special word for the grass. You spend a lot of time in the grass in this game, and it is yet another visual triumph for *Delta*: not just the way the blades shift individually and

SOLID STATE

Where *Delta* fits into the wider MGS timeline



METAL GEAR SOLID (1998)
The original game in the series. Solid Snake must infiltrate a nuclear weapons facility and neutralise a terrorist threat.



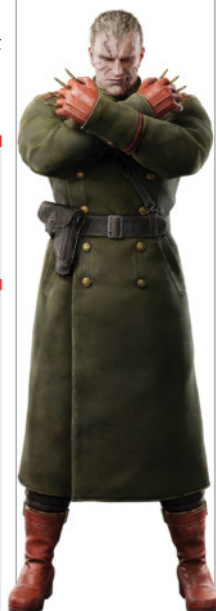
METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY (2001)
The second MGS game sees Solid Snake infiltrate a huge offshore clean-up facility that has been taken over.



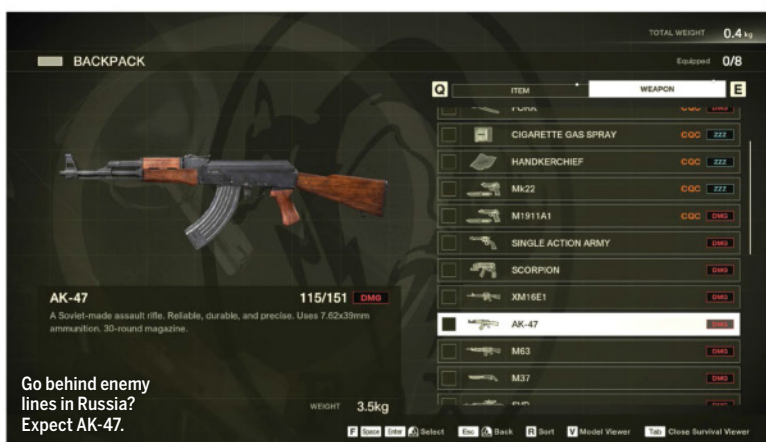
METAL GEAR SOLID 4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS (2008)
After *Snake Eater*'s foray to the past, the fourth MGS game is set five years after *Sons of Liberty*.



METAL GEAR SOLID 5: PHANTOM PAIN (2015)
Another entry set in the past, *Phantom Pain* follows Venom Snake as he ventures into Soviet-occupied Afghanistan.



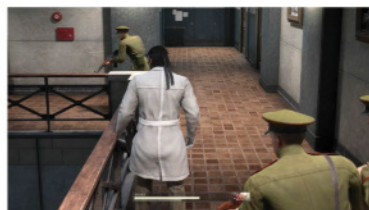
Snake listening to the latest PC Gamer podcast



Go behind enemy lines in Russia? Expect AK-47.



UPPER LEFT: "Wow! You're right. The K-Pop Demon Hunters soundtrack is banging!"



LOWER LEFT: The perfect disguise. What do you mean scientists don't wear bandanas?



Snake and Ocelot compete in a freestyle '80s-style dance-off.



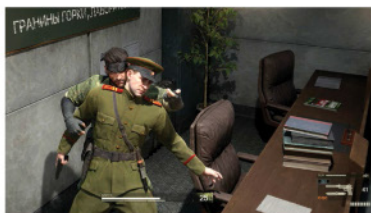
The Cobra Unit are all, speaking plainly, bonkers.



RIGHT: The End is a legendary sniper. Also, full beard aficionado.



LOWER RIGHT: "That's right, my comrade, PC Gamer was always superior to PC Zone."



Sneak crouches tactically. Then lets one off.



respond to movement, both animal and human, but the seamless transition into first-person view, and how it clusters around your vision.

It wouldn't be strictly true to say there is nothing new about *Metal Gear Solid Delta*, but that is perhaps to underestimate what an awesome feat it is to recreate a game of such density. *Metal Gear*

Solid 5 was the capstone that saw the series fully embrace its sandbox soul, but it was always lurking there, and in *Delta* your experience will be what you make it. Some will play this as an action game and sprint through, blowing away guards and bosses, and roll credits after 15 hours wondering what all the fuss is about.

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

Snake Eater's various systems are left unchanged beyond UI improvements, which in themselves can be a big deal. Camouflage, which used to be in the pause menu, is now activated by holding Up on the D-pad and choosing between outfits, with a swish FOX logo appearing as Snake is instantly re-upholstered. It's slick and much more intuitive.

When Konami didn't know what to do with something, it's left unchanged. The wound system sees you treating Snake's injuries and often applying multiple remedies: healing a gunshot requires four different items to be selected. That's fine, except you will end up repeatedly treating the same wounds in the same way. Dipping out of the action to click multiple items in a menu, then doing it again 30 seconds later, is never going to be a good time.

Delta gets away with it because the thematic link is so strong. It goes way beyond 'oh that's neat' when you swim through swamp water and emerge covered in leeches, then get to burn them all off with Snake's ever-present cigar. Throughout the course of the mission Snake gets absolutely brutalised, and *Delta's* stunning graphics make this more horrible than ever. There's a torture sequence where the sheer fidelity of the wounds covering Snake's body and his reactions made me wince. So even when you find yourself underwater, yet somehow paused to dig a bullet out of your neck with a

knife, apply disinfectant and whack a bandage on, it somehow works.

You sign up to suspend your disbelief early: the opening mission briefing makes great play of how being caught will cause an international incident with Russia; you then spend most of the game trading barbs with Russian military types who know what you're up to.

Metal Gear as a whole is a bit like this. This is a stealth game, but really, it's a game about what happens when you get caught. I started *Delta* the same way I've started every game in the series, intending to silently infiltrate a big old base and leave nary a trace. Fast-forward a few hours: the Russians have spotted me about three dozen times and I'm half-naked on top of a hill surrounded by porno mags and blasting a machine gun bellowing, "WHERE IS YOUR STALIN NOW COMRADES!" and loving it.

YOU'RE PRETTY GOOD

I played *Delta* on normal difficulty, which hits a nice balance of being forgiving enough that even larger encounters are manageable, while occasionally reminding you that, yes, picking a fight with four heavily armed soldiers can be a bad thing. I

I'm half-naked, surrounded by porno mags, blasting a machine gun



died multiple times in my playthrough despite probably finishing the original five or six times, and more than a few of those were down to the boss fights.

Kojima was always good at boss fights, and *Snake Eater's* Cobra Unit is arguably his finest collection of weirdos. They benefit hugely from *Metal Gear Solid Delta's* gorgeous makeover. I never found the fight against The Fury especially memorable in the original, and the core of it is no different here, but it's a fight against a flying pyromaniac who's trying to burn you to death in an enclosed space: this new version's flame effects overwhelm your screen and audio as you desperately try to rush Snake out of the way and find room for a clean shot.

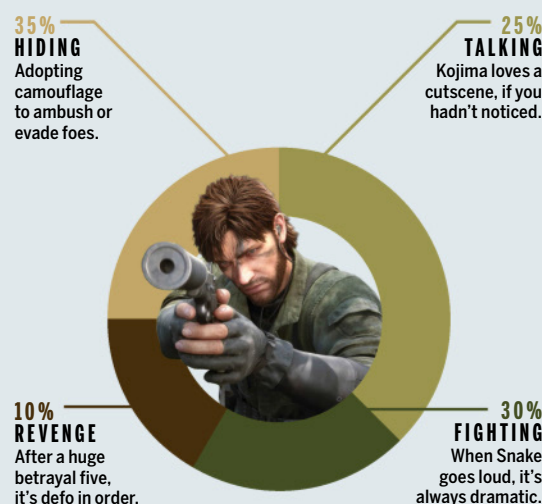
The last quarter of the game is a thrilling and breakneck rush through multiple boss fights, an extended chase sequence with the Shagohad (*Snake Eater's* Metal Gear), the fight against the Shagohad itself, then the climactic encounter with The Boss. The chase sequence in particular is unchanged in its elements, but recreated with such intensity that its cinematic flair sings and you find yourself thinking they don't make 'em like this any more – but they didn't make it exactly like this back then, either.

I started *Delta* worried that Konami was hewing far too close to the original game, and spent the opening hours wondering if it would become its own thing. It doesn't really. But in that final stretch, I just didn't want it to end.

I still wonder what if. What if Kojima's presence – or absence – didn't hang so heavily on *Metal Gear's* legacy. What if Konami had been a little bit bolder. What if it had taken a swing at changing things up, and shown the confidence to mess around with greatness. I understand why it didn't: the publisher knew it couldn't afford to mess this up. Ultimately, *Delta* answers the question it most needed to answer: can Konami still make a great *Metal Gear* game? By most metrics I think this has aced it. ■

SNAKE BAKE

How Snake spends his time in *Delta*



PC GAMER VERDICT

A gorgeous remake of a true classic that could, and maybe should, have tried to do a tiny bit more.

87

REVIEW

Destiny 2: The Edge of Fate



TICKET TO GRIND

It's a brand new **DESTINY 2** with **THE EDGE OF FATE**. Can I have the old one back?

By Phil Savage

The *Edge of Fate* marks a landmark shift for *Destiny 2*. It's both the launch of a new saga – an attempt to hook players into a bold new direction for the game's story – and a massive change to *Destiny*'s most fundamental progression systems. Seasons are gone. Loot has been overhauled. The very structure of the activities you play is so radically different that its iconic menu screen of different worlds has been desaturated to signify the move towards something new.

As a story, it succeeds. The expansion takes some big narrative swings, and follows through with most of them, seeding new concepts and characters that the story can build on while still retaining a sense of mystery and adventure. Since *Shadowkeep* we've been on a fixed course towards a confrontation with the Witness. Now, at the beginning of this new saga, it feels like future expansions could be anything – liberally picking from *Destiny*'s dense tangle of lore threads while building towards the vague threat gestured at during *The Edge of Fate*'s final moments.

It's an exciting place for *Destiny*'s story to be. Unfortunately the game that story is built upon feels worse to play in almost every way.

Sure, the moment-to-moment gunplay is still strong; the feel of the

game's most basic interaction remains intact. But around that core so much has changed, and almost none of it for the better.

CULT OF SINGULARITY

The new destination this time around is Kepler, a planetoid in the outer reaches of the solar system. We're called there via a mysterious invitation, and discover a black hole that, if left unchecked, threatens to consume the entire solar system.

As a location, it does its job well enough. Its central hub is a scientific outpost for the Aionians, the

descendants of a community of Golden Age humans who have made a religion out of science. In many ways, it feels more lively and populated than Neomuna. Plenty in the community have complained

**So much
has changed,
and almost
none of it for
the better**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The seventh *Destiny 2* expansion, kicking off a new saga for the game

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Bungie

PUBLISHER
Bungie

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 3700X,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3080Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
[bungie.net/7/en/
Destiny](https://bungie.net/7/en/Destiny)

about Kepler's reuse of assets, the bits of Titan, the Tangled Shore and Io that help tie it all together. Your mileage may vary here, but it didn't bother me. It all fits together well. The bigger issue is that, outside of the campaign's big reveal, there's very little spectacle to be found.

Kepler's tangle of caves, warrens and outposts just doesn't have the same atmosphere and identity as previous *Destiny 2* locations. There's nothing on par with the abstract symbolism of The Pale Heart, the moody swamps of Savathun's Throne World, even Neomuna.

It's an issue throughout the campaign, too. The missions are fine, but rarely ever more than that. *The Edge of Fate*'s campaign is split between larger main missions and shorter 'Time Latch' quests, plus a handful of side stories that amount to little more than hunting down a handful of collectibles.

Each mission inevitably ends in a fight against a boss with a segmented health bar, where depleting each section triggers an immune phase you have to overcome before you're allowed to do more damage. It's a perfectly fine trick in moderation, but here it's every fight, compounding the issue of how samey everything feels and how prescribed the solutions to any particular fight are.

ROTE-A-DOPE

Kepler's main gimmick is that, as you progress through the campaign, you'll unlock new abilities that are specific to the planetoid itself. Most are pretty basic – if something blocks your progress, the solution will be nearby.

The showcase ability is Matterspark, which is simultaneously the best and worst of the bunch. It lets you turn into a little electric ball that can fit through vents and zip around tunnels. It's heavily overused in the campaign – the only times I was ever stuck, unsure of how to progress, were when I hadn't found the tiny gap I was supposed to roll

FATE TO DATE

A recent history of *Destiny 2* instalments



THE WITCH QUEEN 2022

With PC Gamer bestowing a cracking score of 89%, *The Witch Queen* was one of *Destiny 2*'s finest updates.



LIGHTFALL 2023

With a disappointing campaign and serious balance issues at launch, this expansion only scored 68% on review.



THE FINAL SHAPE 2024

Destiny's first saga ended with one of the absolute best instalments in the series' history, scoring 92%.



THE EDGE OF FATE 2025

The start of a new saga sees *Destiny 2*'s core systems overhauled to, overall, terrible results. Scores 54%.

Destiny 2: The Edge of Fate

into. In combat, though, I actually quite enjoy dipping in and out of ball form – using its later upgrades to escape otherwise deadly situations, recharging my health as I do.

Kepler's abilities are mostly incredibly rote, however. It's only in the later campaign missions that you're asked to combine them in

something approaching a puzzle – a handful of fun interactions that show potential, but never quite make the most of the tools you've been given. Despite the claims made pre-release – and the fact that, at one point in the campaign you're given the choice between which of two different mission paths you do first – *The Edge of Fate* is not a Metroidvania.

FACTS OF THE MATTER

Stating the obvious: Matterspark and its associated abilities are no substitute for proper game-wide sandbox additions. The lack of any new ability options – even just some additional aspects or fragments for one of the existing subclasses – is keenly felt. I'm using the same builds as I was before *The Edge of Fate* launched, with nothing to look forward to beyond the single new exotic armour piece you unlock for each class by completing the campaign on legendary difficulty.

There's a nod to buildcrafting through the armour bonuses you can now earn – passive effects enabled for equipping two or four of the same set of threads. Some are incidentally useful, but many are too niche and

situational. The basic two-piece bonus for Kepler's destination armour only activates if you're using a rocket or grenade launcher, which is a poor way to introduce the system to players. I'm just not going to remake my build to take advantage of a minor bonus that only applies for a specific type of weapon.

The benefit of the new system is that stats are more useful and desirable

The extra twist of the knife here is that my builds – the same ones I've been using throughout the last year – generally feel worse than they did before. Bungie has overhauled armour stats for *The Edge of Fate*, and while the new system has some advantages, it also means you'll likely feel much weaker without some significant investment.

The benefit of the new system is that stats are more useful and desirable than they were before. Nearly all of the stat types are worth investing in, with extra bonuses available if you exceed the previous cap of 100. Put 100 stat points into melee and it will charge faster. Go over that number and your charged melee will also do more damage.

There is the framework of a system I like here. You are rewarded for building into the options most valuable to your build, which makes a lot of sense. But I'd argue that, in the worst cases, Bungie's redesign actively reduces buildcrafting options. Take the new weapon stat, which I fundamentally disagree with as a concept. It increases your damage against minor and major enemies up to 100 points, and then

starts buffing ammo and boss damage above it. For all its space magic, *Destiny 2* is still first and foremost an FPS. Every build is, at the end of the day, a weapon build.

If you're running endgame activities the weapon stat is basically mandatory. That's not just because of the increased damage, although it's a nice bonus. It's because ammo generation is now something you have to actively build into if you want even a sniff of a heavy brick to help you bring down a boss.

Ammo is more deterministic now – a set of progress bars tell you when your next heavy and special ammo drop will occur. This is ostensibly an improvement, but the current implementation is just so wildly stingy about how much ammo each brick now grants.

I was building as heavily as I could into ammo generation during a recent run of the new Desert Perpetual raid, but was nowhere near filling my heavy between each damage phase. Sacrificing every interesting part of your build in the name of DPS already feels bad. Not even getting a satisfying payoff for doing so just feels insulting.

STAT MAD

The weapon stat is the big outlier, but even outside of it stats are inconsistent in their usefulness, particularly how much they penalise you for not investing into them. It's not just that you get less passive ability regeneration for low investment into grenade or melee or super ability – it's that you also get less benefit from additional sources of energy gain. Before, you could compensate for stat deficiencies through mods and aspects and weapon perks. It's why nobody invested in the Intellect stat, because orb generation perks were so common. Now, the new super stat actively reduces the amount of energy gain that orbs of power give.

That means external sources of healing are even more desirable, because they let you completely sidestep investing into the health stat. At the other end, energy generation perks like Demolitionist or Attrition Orbs are slightly less valuable, because you have to also invest in the targeted stat to receive their full benefit.

And that's to say nothing of the sweeping round of nerfs seemingly

WHAT GOES UP

Introducing the new Fallen enemy, the Corsair



1 CORSAIRS

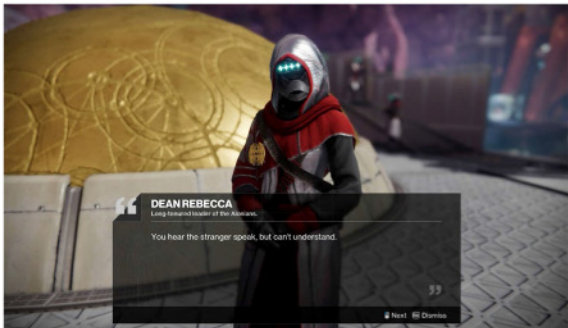
Corsairs are Bungie's answer to the question: What if Vandals could fly now?

2 NIMBLE

They're pretty nimble in combat, frequently air-dashing to avoid your fire.

3 BOMB

Get too close and their jets will carpet bomb the ground with burning flames.



ABOVE: On the lookout for a better *Destiny 2* expansion.

FAR LEFT: At least there's a nod to building with armour bonuses.

LEFT: The new Matterspark ability let's you turn into a ball of electricity and zip about.



+67
Timelost Spirit Bloom
Material

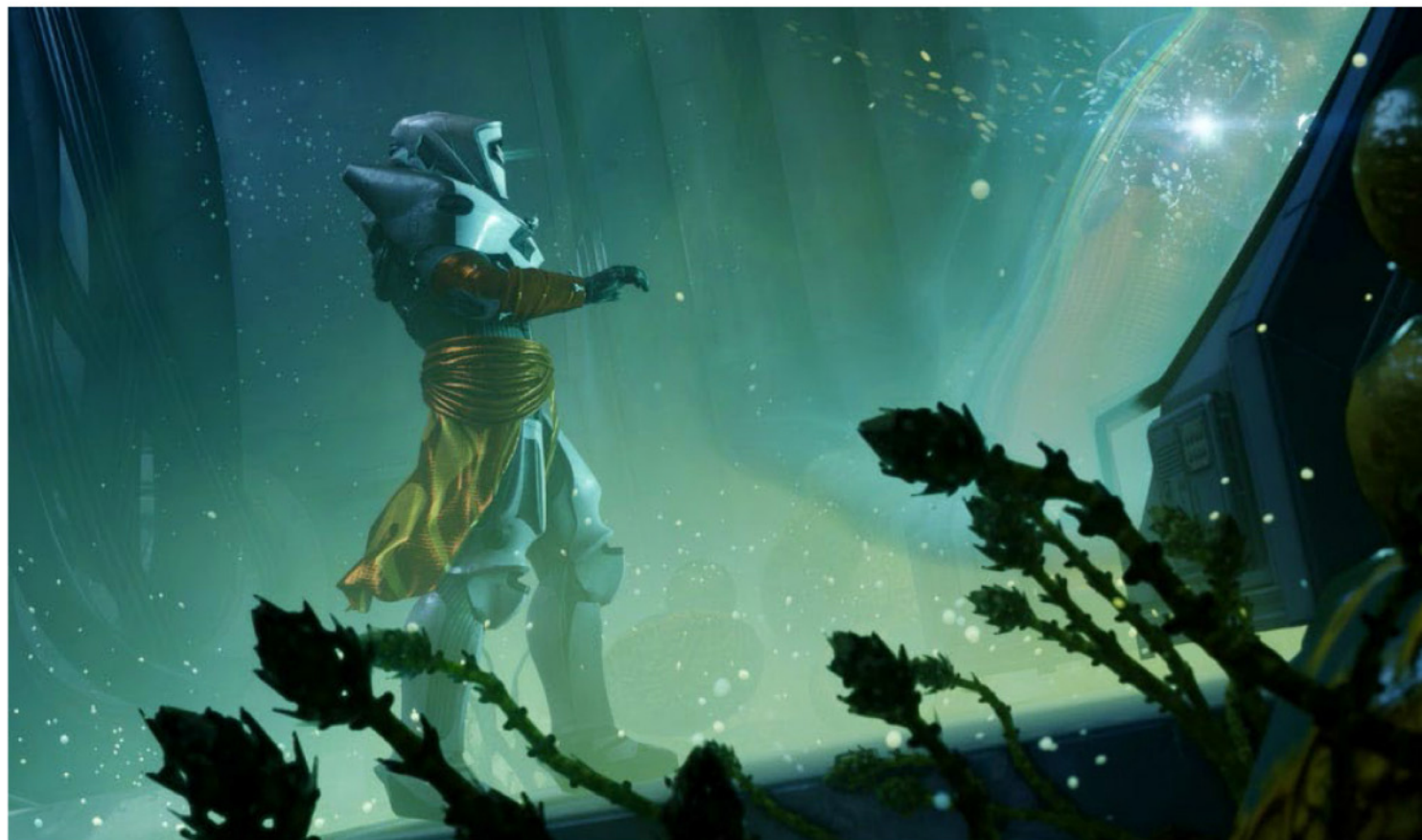
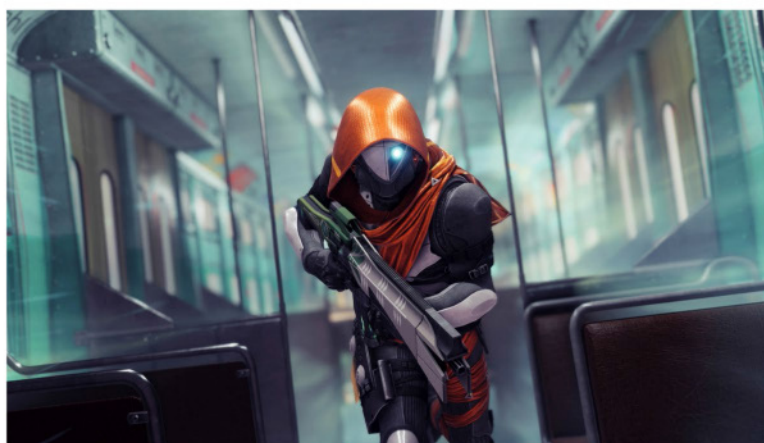
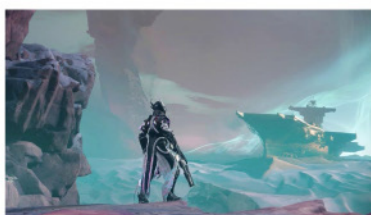




ABOVE: *The Edge of Fate*'s new Fallen enemy, the Corsair.

FAR RIGHT: Commuting to another disappointing raid.

BELOW: *The Edge of Fate*'s new destination is Kepler, a planetoid in the outer reaches of the solar system.



deployed to mitigate the potential power creep of players investing as heavily as possible into a meta build's target stats. Some build options are improvements, sure. Others just feel less impactful, even if you've bought into their strengths.

THINKING WITH PORTAL

The theoretical bright spot of the new armour system is that it's possible to gain more stat points than before. I say theoretical, because getting to where you're consistently earning high-stat gear is going to involve a truly monumental amount of grinding.

Armour and weapons are tiered now. A tier-one gun, for example, is just a gun – two perks, a mod slot, the standard stuff. Higher tiers give extra bonuses – enhanced perks, enhanced mods, two perk options per column, and so on. By tier five, you're getting the works: everything enhanced, three perks per column, unique ornaments, the lot. Armour works the same way, with much higher stat rolls for tier five drops – a major boon given the extra investment required under the new system.

Actually earning tier-five loot, though, feels out of reach of all but the most dedicated players. You'll only unlock tier four and five loot at the highest difficulty levels, which you can only access by raising your power level. That means grinding.

This is what *Destiny 2* is now. The new 'season' – Reclamation – doesn't feature a new activity or any additional story. Instead, it all takes place in the 'Portal' – the new hub that houses the game's reworked power grind, and thus the pursuit of better gear. There are four options here: Solo Ops are a selection of short missions you can complete on your own; Fireteam Ops contain three-person activities; Pinnacle Ops house longer activities; and Crucible Ops is for PvP. You select an activity, customise its difficulty, then run it to earn some rewards. And then you do it again, and again, and again.

If you've played *Destiny 2* for any length of time, these will all be activities you've done before: Strikes, Battlegrounds, exotic missions, Onslaught. Some, like Empire Hunts, you probably haven't touched for

years – a decent way to get some extra life out of old expansion missions. The Solo Ops are technically new and decently fun, but ultimately they're just a series of short, basic objectives that all take place on a section of an existing destination – a repurposed Lost Sector, or part of an old campaign

mission. I've been to The Salt Mines more in the last weeks than I have since the Red War.

There is the foundation of something workable here, the potential to expand into a list of options both new

and old. But currently there's just far too little to do. The Pinnacle Ops selection contains just three missions – the fourth was removed because players discovered it was the most efficient way to grind and were speedrunning it ad nauseum.

It's baffling to me that the system didn't launch with something fresh – a new three-player activity that could showcase the Portal's future potential. If the idea is that new destinations like Kepler will feature their own bespoke abilities, why is Kepler so underrepresented in the Portal – relegated to a single Solo Op?

The power climb to the new soft cap of 200 is painless – every piece of loot you earn at this point is an increase to your overall level. I was around 150 when I finished the legendary campaign, and it didn't take long to make it the rest of the way. After 200 is when you switch to earning 'seasonal power', which is gained exclusively through Portal activities – up to the new cap of 450. I have played a decent amount over the last two weeks, but right now am only at around 250 power. Progress feels agonisingly slow.

This grind will only count for this current season. In December, when *Renegades* launches, players will be reset back to the soft cap – ready to do it all again. Progress is fleeting. The climb is the game now. And that means slogging through hours of years-old content, earning worse loot before you can make any headway to improving your stats and builds.

This grind is made worse by the fact that power doesn't actually have a purpose beyond locking you out of accessing the harder difficulties that grant the best tiers of weapons and

armour. In matchmade activities, you will always be weaker than your enemies – no matter whether you're level 250 or 450.

Somehow, Bungie has taken the worst elements of multiple live-service grinds and combined them into something that feels terrible to interact with over any serious length of time. We have a longer power climb, but that level does nothing to actually help you grow in strength. It feels bad on a psychological level – a nakedly artificial grind.

ROUGH AROUND THE EDGE

Usually at this point in a *Destiny 2* expansion, I'd have no shortage of things to do. A couple of weeks after *The Final Shape* launched, I still had a checklist of activities to complete and loot to acquire – so much so that I'd barely touched its new seasonal activities. Here, two weeks after *The Edge of Fate*'s release, I've seen it all.

After *The Edge of Fate* campaign, you unlock a single exotic quest – a trivial collectathon across Kepler – and a new activity, Sieve, available on a timer for 30 minutes every two hours. Beyond that, the only endgame to speak of is repeating the campaign again on higher difficulties.

Over in the Portal, I'm also experiencing the fatigue of repetition. I'm playing activities that have been in the game for years in order to earn loot that's worse than what I had equipped before the expansion launched, all for the chance to one day, be able to earn a meaningful improvement to one of my builds.

It was always going to be impossible for Bungie – a studio that has historically struggled to match its playerbase's hunger for new activities – to create two expansions a year without a major drop in how much stuff each one contains. But let's look at it another way: *The Edge of Fate* is only £10 less than *The Final Shape* at launch, and yet it offers the player exponentially less to do. It's simply bad value for money; a good story attached to a middling campaign tied to a disastrous overarching structure that demands too much of its players with too little in return. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Thanks to its wide-ranging overhauls, this update has become memorable for all the wrong reasons.

54

RYU-LLY GOOD

The Blasphemous devs lighten up with **NINJA GAIDEN: RAGEBOUND**

By Abbie Stone

Well, this is a nice surprise. Previous *Ninja Gaiden* games have been about as warm and welcoming as being booted down a flight of stairs. But *Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound* has pulled off a fun revival that's far and away the most accessible *Ninja Gaiden* yet. And by 'most accessible' I mean 'it waits a few hours before repeatedly kicking you in the face'. Hey, it's a start.

The Game Kitchen has slammed an adrenaline shot into 2D *Gaiden* and made a game that's far more interested in keeping your murderous momentum up than just repeatedly

killing you. Enemies leap on screen and you're encouraged to slice them in two before they've even finished their intro animation. Ideally you're doing this while sprinting forwards and with your next target in your swords' sights.

You play as Kenji, a student of usual protagonist Ryu Hayabusa, who's apparently too busy starring in the very first *Ninja Gaiden* to help out here. Kenji's got a basic sword slash attack, throwing knives and a Sonic-esque bounce that both hurts enemies and lets him use them as handy makeshift platforms, so at least they don't die in vain.

Once you unlock the shop you can buy a talisman that restores health on each kill, as long as you have at least a +3 kill streak going. Buy this immediately. It's the missing piece that makes the game absolutely sing as a ninja vampire sim, encouraging you to slice your way through as swiftly as you can.

You're soon forced to team up with Kumori, a lady ninja from the rival Black Spider clan. Kenji and Kumori's prickly relationship is a lot of fun, with Kenji constantly calling her out for the Black Spiders' apparent moral inferiority, and Kumori preferring to tease Kenji for thinking pirates are cool. Awww.

Together you slay your way through villages, mountains, navy

bases and... a sewer level? Tsk tsk. Well, at least the linear campaign is too restless to ever keep you in one place for long. Essentially it's a series of kill chains and challenges.

You play as Kenji, a student of usual protagonist Ryu Hayabusa

GLORY ENEMIES

Ragebound rushes you through the campaign too swiftly for repetitiveness to ever truly sink in, but no one's going to accuse its moveset of being complex. It's actually

kind of novel to play a game in 2025 that puts a sword in your hand and then doesn't have a parry mechanic. I liked the glowy enemies that, when

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The first new 2D *Ninja Gaiden* in basically forever

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
The Game Kitchen

PUBLISHER
Dotemu, Joystick

REVIEWED ON
Asus ROG Ally

STEAM DECK
Unverified, but come on, it'll be fine

LINK
dotemu.com/games/ninja-gaiden-ragebound

properly dispatched, gave me a massively overpowered strike immediately after. But the novelty of the set pieces, like a battle aboard a runaway train, or being chased through a construction yard by a demon driving a bulldozer, stick in the memory far more than how I fought my way through them.

Fans of the original games who've been spitting blood at this review since I used the word 'accessible' earlier will be pleased to know *Ragebound* eventually becomes an asshole. The last trio of bosses are brutal affairs that test every skill the game's taught you. Then there are the secret levels, which you'll find under a tab labelled SECRET LEVELS. These are far more hardcore, with some of the checkpoint placement apparently done by Satan while he was in a foul mood. If a tougher challenge is what you want from a *Ninja Gaiden*, you'll find it here.

Not always one that plays fair, mind. You'd likely have to be clairvoyant to get through some of Keumuri's sections first time. And the tracker that tells you how many kills you've chained sometimes doesn't show up for work. Hugely infuriating when you've got that aforementioned talisman equipped that grants health back for keeping it in play. It's also not above the occasional cheap death worthy of its NES predecessors.

I still almost always enjoyed the seven-ish hours it took to see the main game. *Blasphemous*' self-serious tone takes a welcome backseat for a silly ninja romp, and like a lot of people, The Game Kitchen turns out to be a lot of fun when it stops droning on about God. I'd love to see what they could do with a more ambitious sequel. ■

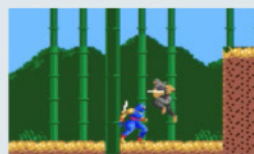
NOT QUITE GAIDEN

Four more spin-off adventures



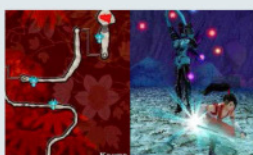
NINJA GAIDEN SHADOW

Prequel to the original, simplified so it can run on Nintendo's Game Boy. Still great fun.



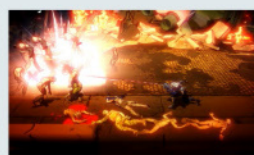
NINJA GAIDEN

On Game Gear. Fight about a million grey ninjas and then get sent right back to the start. Boo!



NINJA GAIDEN DRAGON SWORD

Hold the Nintendo DS like a book then control Ryu with the stylus.



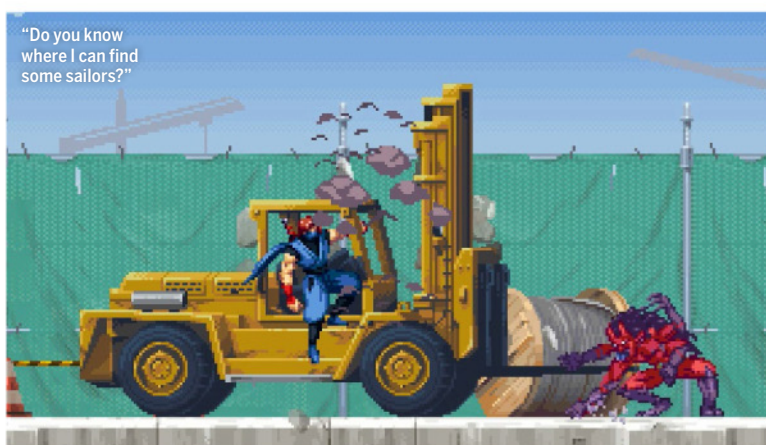
YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z

Oof. Woefully inept spin-off so bad that it explains why we didn't get another for a decade. Avoid.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound is a fun revival of the hack-and-slash series that opts for execution over innovation.

78



LEFT: It's now a construction site owned by an elite ninja organisation. Because of course.

BELOW: Certain bits are so bloody, you wonder if Kenji has a hosepipe full of the red stuff hidden in his sword.



COSA NO-SIR

MAFIA: THE OLD COUNTRY is a failed experiment

By Joshua Wolens

The *Mafia* series has never had a clue what to do with its open world. In *Mafia*, the city of Lost Heaven was all set dressing. In *Mafia 2*, all the side activities that would have rounded out the base game were carved off to be flogged to you later as DLC. *Mafia 3*'s side activities made for an endless cycle of clearing the same damn goons out of the same damn warehouse.

So if there's anything shocking about *Mafia: The Old Country* trading in the series' rambling, aimless maps for a strict focus on its main plot, it's only that it hadn't been done sooner. It's ostensibly the clear right move, cutting out the cruft to concentrate on the mob tales that have always been what people actually like about these games. By rights, it should be a winning formula. It is not. *The Old Country*'s rote crime story can't bear the weight of keeping you interested even at a svelte 13-hour runtime (compared to the prior game's 40).

Did those duff open worlds do more than we gave them credit for? Whatever your gripes with *Mafia 3*, I still fell in love with that game because, regardless of anything else, there's something to be said for screaming down the highway in a red corvette listening to Eve of

Destruction on the radio, pausing intermittently to hop out and punch racists. Take away that theme-park reconstruction of a particular era and what are you left with? A shell of a story in a shell of a game.

Did those duff open worlds do more than we gave them credit for?

GOD, FATHER

Mafia: The Old Country starts you out in the ratty miner's garb of Enzo Favara, a no-name Sicilian labourer who was more or less sold into slavery at five years old

to pay off a portion of his father's debts. Which isn't a great start. An even worse start is what happens about 15 minutes after you hit new game: Mount-Etna-by-another-name gives a belch that collapses the mine on your head.

One dead best friend, a knife fight with your manager, and a horseback chase across the Sicilian countryside later and you find yourself at the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Local boy joins Sicilian mob in 1904. Things go as well as you'd expect

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Hangar 13

PUBLISHER
2K

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3700x,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
[mafia.2k.com/en-GB/
the-old-country](https://mafia.2k.com/en-GB/the-old-country)

mercy (and in the employ) of Don Torrissi, a local legitimate businessman who sounds like an Italian Con O'Neill and has the build of an American XL Bully.

Let's set up some hanging plot threads: Don Torrissi has a daughter, the beautiful and charming Isabella, whom he intends to marry off to the son of a local baron. Gosh, she sure does seem to have a soft spot for Enzo, though. Working alongside Enzo is the Don's nephew, Cesare, a brash hothead with big ambitions who rankles when his uncle starts lavishing favour on the smart, temperate new guy. Overseeing Enzo and Cesare is Luca, a Torrissi lieutenant with a solid head on his shoulders, a loving relationship with his wife, and a new baby on the way.

Either I am supernaturally talented at figuring out where plots are going within ten seconds of them beginning, or every single one of these threads unfolds in the most predictable way possible. If there's a surprise in how these arcs play out, it's only that there are no surprises, that things really do go how you immediately anticipate them going right from the very start.

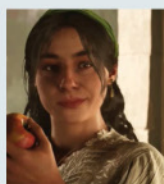
That's not to say it's awful. Sometimes clichés become clichés because they work, and even the routine stories *The Old Country* has to tell about its characters are buoyed by strong performances and decent dialogue, with the quiet menace of the game's two hostile capi dei capi serving as particular standouts.

But there's only so much work good acting can do when it's serving a story you feel like you've seen a hundred times before. *Mafia: The Old Country* is a decent 'one of those mob stories', but it's only ever 'one of those mob stories', never veering into uncharted territory. Never taking the big, weird risks its immediate predecessor did.

It's an issue made all the more glaring by the times the story does happen to brush up against

UOMINI D'ONORE

The friendly faces of Sicily



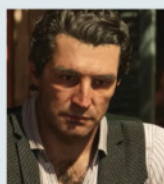
ISABELLA TORRISI

The flirtatious Don's daughter. Will that ever be a problem? Of course not. Don't even worry about it.



LUCA TRAPANI

Don Torrissi's levelheaded lieutenant and – Easter egg – father of Sam from *Mafia 1*.



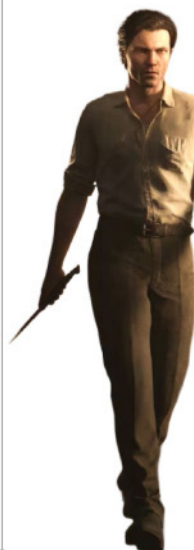
DON TORRISI

A charming legitimate businessman who's always prepared to discuss things reasonably.



DON SPADARO

Don Torrissi's sworn nemesis and your previous employer at the Collezolfo mine. Quietly menacing.



Your pal Cesare
will surely always
be your friend...



LEFT: Mob life is
mostly about
chauffeuring
angry old men.



Prepare to see a
lot of this.



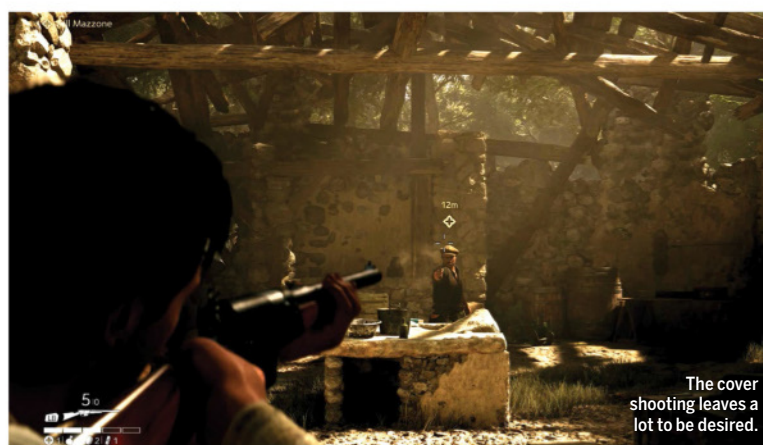
Sicily is known for its tranquillity.



RIGHT: The Romans built waist-high walls for these occasions.



UPPER RIGHT: Weapons are period-accurate. Shame the gunplay is lacklustre.



The cover shooting leaves a lot to be desired.



something more interesting. One of the game's earliest missions deploys you to break a strike at a local quarry, and the game's 'in the car on the way to the mission' chatter references your bosses' early days as union-busting muscle multiple times. And then, uh, that's it.

No story about the Sicilian mob's hand-in-glove relationship with Italian capital, no real delving into the economic or political side of organised crime. Even the spectre of anarchist terrorists, referenced repeatedly throughout the game, never becomes more than a convenient scapegoat to blame all your mob violence on. Instead of focusing on these deep and interesting narrative wells, *The Old Country* touches on them before aggressively yanking you back to focus on its characters and their inevitable endings.

MAMBO ITALIANO

Mafia has never felt amazing in the hand. It's never been terrible, but no one's writing long love letters to the gunflee of Vito's 1911 in *Mafia 2*, or the perfectly tuned driving of *Mafia 3*. Every entry is a game you love – if you love it – in spite of its flawed basics, not because it nails them.

Zeroing in on a tighter, smaller project doesn't seem to have done much to help this state of affairs. If anything, *Mafia: The Old Country* veers between bland, monotonous, and frustrating when it comes to the things it actually has you do. Every mission consists of one, some, or all of four modes: stealth, combat, driving/riding and knife fights.

Stealth is by far the most preferable. Not because it scintillates, but because it's incredibly quick and easy. Your enemies are idiots, they can't see more than a foot in front of their faces, and the opportunities to distract them, sending them galumphing off into a quiet corner to wait for death, are many.

The driving and horse riding are fine, too. Mostly, you're just traversing between objectives, but in what almost feels like an in-joke for series fans (*Mafia 1* had a difficult racing mission), the game features two entire races that you have to win for the honour of your capo.

Neither are too hard, but they will give you trauma flashbacks if you're a long-time fan. Things get a tad more tiresome when you have to chase an enemy: the roads of early-1900s Sicily are tight and badly marked, and your crank-started cars don't exactly handle well, but even then the demands aren't too onerous.

Your enemies can't see more than a foot in front of their faces

GUNFIGHTERS

Which leaves the two kinds of combat. At range, *Mafia: The Old Country* feels like a mid-budget Xbox 360 cover shooter yanked from its own era and transplanted, dazed,

into our own. Your enemies are still idiots: they'll hop out from behind cover to march stony-faced towards your shotgun, and constantly bark out things like 'I'm reloading' to let you know now would be a good time to shoot them in the head.

At one point, I accidentally tossed a coin (a stealth-mode distraction) instead of a grenade, prompting an enemy to forget about our armed contretemps in order to jump up from behind his waist-high wall and check out what that noise was. I shot him.

But it sometimes feels like the roles are switched – like your enemies all have auto-targeting and it's you, the player, who has been

lumbered with Stormtrooper aim to make their lives easier.

Playing on normal, which snaps you to enemies whenever you take aim with the gamepad, I often found my reticule manifesting next to, not on top of, enemies, which combined with the ample spread on these turn-of-the-century guns meant I was constantly missing shots at what felt like point-blank range. Meanwhile, all these goddamn Sicilian Green Berets peppered me with perfect shots whenever I popped up from behind cover. And then there are the knife fights.

It's almost comical. If you're going up against a named character, you can guarantee that at some point they will come charging at you from off-screen during a cutscene and knock your gun from your hand, forcing you into a knife fight based around parrying, dodging and riposting. At one point, I was able to tell that a seemingly dead major antagonist wasn't truly dead because I hadn't had a knife fight with him.

The fights themselves are formulaic – parry, jab, parry, jab until your opponent is at half-health, at which point there will always be a brief cutscene where they get the upper hand, then you parry, jab, parry, jab the rest of their health bar away. This happens in 11 fights.

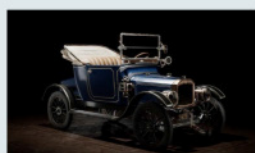
CHE BRUTTA FIGURA

I've always been a champion of games whose ambitions outpace their budgets or technical capacities. Even when a game kind of sucks, I've been known to fall in love with it if it has big ideas it goes for earnestly. I don't think any of the previous *Mafia* games kind of suck, but I've slotted them into this category for years: charming, strange, and janky. They fall in the gutter, but at least they're looking at the stars.

But *Mafia: The Old Country* strips that ambition out to focus on the fundamentals, and then doesn't improve the fundamentals at all. It's a failed experiment and a bitter disappointment for me as a long-time fan of the series. But hey, I guess Sicily is at least pretty to look at. ■

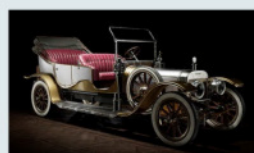
CARCYCLOPEDIA

Some lavishly rendered some vehicles



YOUR STARTER CLUNKER

No self-respecting mafioso would be seen in one, but it's slightly better than horseback.



THE BOSS' CAR

Expect to see Don Torrisi getting ferried around in this plush thing. Look, but don't touch.



LITERALLY A RACING CAR

Was it made for the dirt roads of Sicily? No. Are you going to use it anyway? Yes.



A BIG YELLOW EASTER EGG

Tommy's cab from *Mafia 1* fell through a wormhole from the 1930s. Don't think about it...

PC GAMER VERDICT

A decent but clichéd story and bland, frustrating gameplay make this the weakest *Mafia* game yet.

45

JOY OF HEX

Nightdive's **HERETIC + HEXEN** remaster plays with the past to entertain the future

By Ian Evenden

Doom gets all the plaudits. Of course it does. Then *Quake* comes along and changes things again, like incorporating mouselook. In between these two early FPS titans, however, came a slew of games that took id's work, often literally, and ran with it. *Heretic* (originally released in 1994) was one of those, and now that game and its sequel have a Nightdive remaster with additional new levels. It's a fascinating slice of history, if not quite up there with the greats of the genre.

Yes, they have mouselook. The very first enemies you meet are up in the air, original dev Raven Software keen to show off this addition to *Doom*'s engine. Your weapon is still in the centre of the screen, but the world feels more 3D as a result.

Heretic is dark fantasy *Doom* and *Hexen* is dark fantasy RPG *Doom*. That's all you really need to know, the plots aren't exactly Martin Amis.

The former game clings more tightly to id's template, its weapons magical analogues of pistol, shotgun, rocket launcher etc. It switches things up with alt fire modes via the Tome of Power, and takes every opportunity to put colourful weapon effects on the screen, but you immediately think 'oh, this is the chainsaw' when you pick up the gloves of the necromancer. Its levels are linear, and there's a lot of red key, red door action to progress, but a rudimentary inventory system is added. There are

plenty of secret areas too, and you're rewarded for heading into the corners and hitting the 'use' button on anything that seems out of place.

Hexen changes things. Not only does it come with an astonishingly '90s prerendered intro sequence, but its combat is more melee and magic focused, and it gives you a choice of three characters (fighter, cleric, mage) at the start, which means

three ways to play. There's a shield to hide behind, a jump button, and breakable walls you can smash your way through when the way seems blocked. It makes use of a hub-and-spoke level structure that these days whiffs faintly of FromSoftware, and should be the more interesting game to play, but it's *Heretic* that claims this crown as its enthusiastic embrace of what made *Doom* great mixes with more imaginative weapons and enemies. *Hexen* is a bit brown and earnest by comparison.

The port has been as expertly done as we've come to expect

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The definitive modern remaster of two Doom Engine games largely forgotten by history

EXPECT TO PAY

£13.50

DEVELOPER

Raven Software, Nightdive Studios

PUBLISHER

Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 7 9800X3D, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 5080

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

s.team/a/3286930

BEYOND BELIEF

The port has been as expertly done as we've come to expect from Nightdive. It's not so much a game as a historical document and an act of digital preservation. Right from the start you're offered a choice between the remaster and the original DOS version and it goes on from there, the new game offering a choice of rendering engines (Vulkan, DX11 and software), a remixed soundtrack from the guy who scored *Doom Eternal*, ultrawide support and 120fps. There's been no attempt to update the graphics, which get extremely pixellated when you're up close, but we can consider this to be an artistic choice in the same vein as *Boltgun*.

The game is Steam Deck verified, and performance is just what you'd expect from a Doom Engine game running on modern hardware: integrated graphics prove no problem. The choice to have always run selected by default means you'll zoom around these levels like you're riding an overclocked Segway, though the sheer speed of it means you'll occasionally struggle to line up a shot. There's a bit of autoaim on offer, but mouse and keyboard remains the best way to play – controllers are fully supported (a massive improvement for a game that would have struggled with plugging a pad into a game port on the PC's sound card, then manually configuring it, when it was launched) with new fast weapon switching. Multiplayer goes up to 16 players in deathmatch or co-op, and there's mod support, meaning this is a lot of game for very little money.

The originals may have been forgotten, but having Nightdive remember them for us is the best way to discover a gem. ■

WHAT'S IN THE BOX? *All the episodes, just no Heretic II*



HERETIC: SHADOW OF THE SERPENT RIDERS
An elf's quest for vengeance against magical warriors who killed his entire race.



HERETIC: FAITH RENEWED
New for this release, the bad guy from *Heretic* is now a god and must be stopped again.



HEXEN: BEYOND HERETIC
In another dimension, more serpent riders need to be whacked in the head with a mace. Repeatedly.



HEXEN: DEATHKINGS OF THE DARK CITADEL
In the realm of the dead, you must make your way home against zombies.



HEXEN: VESTIGES OF GRANDEUR
Nightdive opens up the *Heretic* universe with puppet-master forces from beyond our imagination.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

If you're going to remaster 30-year-old games, this is the way to do it. An entertaining chunk of FPS history.

75



ABOVE: Jeff, Bob and Steve are just gargoyles living their best lives. For two more seconds.

FAR LEFT: Just imagine scraping these bad boys down a blackboard: SKREEEE!





It's a legal requirement for a puzzle game to feature cubes and pressure plates.

ON THE BOX

Make first-person puzzler **TELLYPORT** your first port of call

Televisions – as we know from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – would make you tiny if you were to step inside one, and that's pretty much the premise of delightful puzzle game *Tellyport*, in which tellies shrink (or grow) the protagonist, but also teleport them clear across the room. These two mechanics converge to create some tricky first-person puzzles, as you explore a cosy lab to find your eccentric inventor grandma.

Of course, the first thing you'll notice isn't the teleporting telly sets, but rather the very groovy décor of the lab, which forgoes the austere test chambers of *Portal* for messy living areas in every conceivable shade of brown. It's Ikea in the '70s, but with a few more box puzzles and fewer meatballs.

The upside of this aesthetic is that the background becomes a part of the experience, as you shrink yourself so small that you can no longer ascend the living room stairs, or you enter a telly and arrive on the ceiling, looking dizzily down at one of the many cosy seating areas. The 'tellyporting' technology feels so much more exciting as it takes place in a familiar, lived-in space – one we can transcend by

turning massive or by walking on the wall like it's the simplest thing.

Now, the reason games like *Portal* are set in empty, white-walled chambers is that those chambers are a lot more readable when it comes

to deciphering the puzzles. It can take a few more seconds here for your brain to register each room's interactable elements, even though the developers have done a good job with all the obviously glowing

power cables and with the overall colour palette, saving all that brown and orange for background objects and leaving blue (mainly) for the mechanical components.

But what about the puzzles themselves? They're a bit too simple for a bit too long, which is less of an

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person puzzler that plays with gravity, size and teleportation

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
ISART Digital Students

PUBLISHER
ISART Digital Students

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/TellyPort

issue in a fuller puzzle game but a shame in one that's only an hour-and-a-half long, as the story finishes just as things are getting interesting. Happily, there are a couple of post-game rooms that really make the most of the clever puzzle mechanics.

TV GUIDE

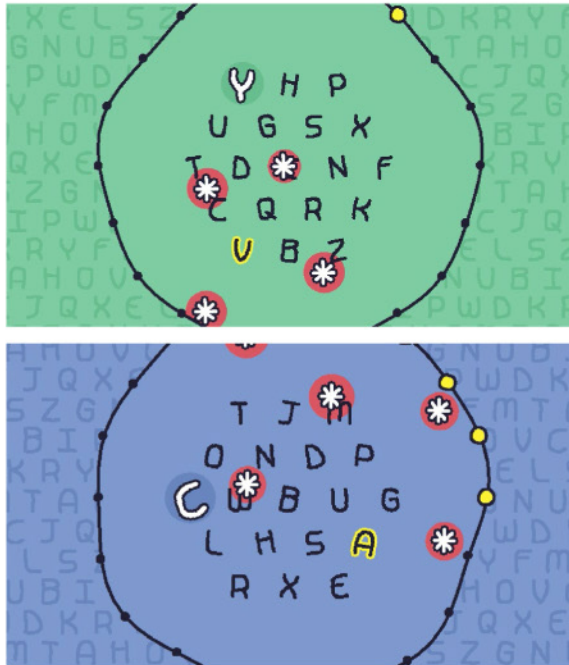
Even in this relatively brief game, by the end it does feel like you've gone on a journey of comprehension and technical mastery. The game begins with the simple concept of transitional televisions, and ends with the player inverting gravity as they shrink themselves and turn a cube into a giant cube. You know a puzzle game is good when it makes you stop for a moment to look in awe at the impossible scene surrounding you. That happened on numerous occasions when I was puzzling my way through *Tellyport*, and I'm pretty sure it will happen to you. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Familiar mechanics combine to create a fresh puzzle game set in an enjoyably retro environment.

82

BELOW: If the roaming asterisks hit you, you're toast.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Daniel Linssen

LINK
bit.ly/DanTyping

LETTERBOXED

Against type in **DANIEL LINSSSEN'S TYPING CHALLENGE**

Our ability to type obviously depends on our familiarity with the keyboard. But what if some joker swapped the letters around? That's the gist of this disorientating puzzle game, which presents a cloud of jumbled letters and asks you to hop between them, while naughty asterisks try to hit you and spoil the fun.

You start each run situated on a letter, and by typing an adjacent letter you'll move to it, with the aim of reaching and collecting all the golden letters. You have to time your moves so you don't get hit by the floating asterisks, and also tactically duck your head to look at your real-life keyboard, as all of the on-screen letters are in a random configuration.

Having spent so many years getting used to QWERTY, this feels a bit like waking up to find your feet

have been put on backwards. My every instinct wants R to be next to F, for K to be nestled snugly by L, but instead my keyboard feels like some alien machine.

The deliberate speed of the game is what brings this together, I think. On Normal at least, you're given just enough time to periodically consult your keyboard, but not so much you can afford to get complacent, as the asterisks will find you in the end. Every acquired dot makes your heart beat that little bit faster, as just one collision will end your run thanks to those asterisks.

As with any skill-based game, you'll be getting a little bit better every time, even if the randomisation will spoil things. Am I getting better at typing? Probably not. But this has given me a new appreciation for good old familiar QWERTY. ■

77

DITHER.IO

Hell is not especially kind in **HELLKIND**

Annoyingly for a magazine, *Hellkind* is not a game that looks great in static screenshots, so you'll have to rely on my feeble words to get its atmosphere across. Waking up in a church near a ritual altar, you have to figure out what the heck is going on and try to escape.

It's a top-down *Resident Evil*, but with a focus on puzzles and atmosphere. That atmosphere is aided enormously by the gloomy 1bit aesthetic, which lays a blanket of dither and shadow over the church.

You're never quite sure what's around you until you creep into a shadowy corner, and the character's FOV reveals a room, possibly slathered in blood. Doors are disguised in the darkness and dither, so the sudden creak as you stumble into one is always surprising. You can

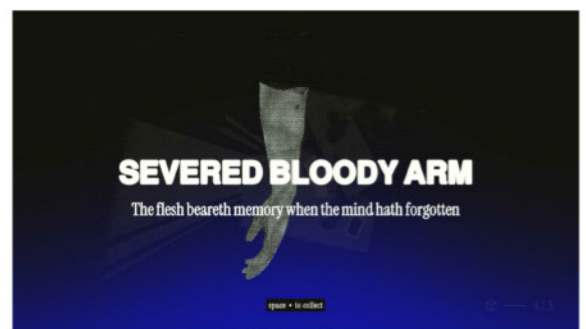
make out just enough to be able to find your way around, however, and the realistic animations and sound design capably pick up the slack.

Obscured under all that dither are some fluid 3D models and impressive visual effects. And the audio design is sumptuous, doing much of the heavy lifting when it comes to imagining the church environment.

This is a game of creeping exploration that transitions into a puzzle game once you've mapped out the church's interior. You won't be surprised to learn that the puzzles are reminiscent of *Resident Evil*, but will require some actual thought. With its masterful atmosphere, slick production values and clever puzzles, this is an exciting mini slice of survival horror that comes with the usual free game caveat: you're going to be left wanting more. ■

81

BELOW: I like a protagonist who tells it like it is.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Motamot

LINK
bit.ly/Hellkind

Honestly the most tempting 'keep out' ever designed in a game.



GORE VERDRINKSKI

The stakes are high in **VAMPYR**

The more I ponder what it means to be a vampire, the more questions remain unanswered. Is it okay to watch YouTube videos of the sun? Are their teeth hollow, like straws that suck up the blood? Do they get seasonal affective depression? The last one would explain a lot about why they're so glum.

Dontnod's *Vampyr* does a mostly good job of the emo vampire trope. As freshly undead doctor Jonathan Reid, you accidentally tuck into the neck of your own sister while in a frenzied state. It's a suitably histrionic opening to a game that's like a new roll of loo roll in its reluctance to actually start: you have to endure flashbacks, chatty boat rides, and verbal soul searching from Jonathan before you get to good bits.

And it is rather good, despite the creaking budget limitations. There's a waxy clumsiness to everything that's visually unappealing, but it's systemically fascinating. Being a vampire game, it's all about gurgling down vast quantities of ichor, but it's rarely as simple as that. It's set in 1918, during a time of Spanish flu and rampant disease, so not all blood is

equal. Some arteries are filled with Grand Cru Classe; others with the Snoop Dogg wine that's on two-for-one in Tesco. Most of the people you meet in *Vampyr* have stories, secrets and histories. It pays to get to know them well, if only so you're fully appraised of their vintage when you

finally tear their throats open. This adds a pleasing detective element, and the sense that the world is full of real people is heightened by the quality of the voice acting. It's something of a surprise: like

asking for the provenance of the meat in Chicken Planet and actually getting a good answer.

BLOOD SIMPLE

The quality of the blood varies and, as a doctor, you can craft cures to help the residents of postwar

There's a waxy clumsiness to everything that's visually unappealing

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

If *Nosferatu* was made by Paul WS Anderson instead of Robert Eggers

EXPECT TO PAY

£35

DEVELOPER

DONTNOD Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

store.steampowered.com/app/427290/Vampyr

London. I say 'help', but this isn't always true: sometimes you're only cleaning their blood to make it more palatable for you, which is like saying you're 'helping' mussels by purging them in water before slathering them in garlic butter. I love how it mixes science and the supernatural, too: a sense of rationality underpins much of *Vampyr*, which is an odd thing to say about a game that lets you throw spears made of blood at baddies. That leads to probably the weakest part of the game. The combat, while not entirely wretched, often feels like it physically gets in the way of the more enjoyable detective elements. It also feels out of step with the investigative moralising at the heart of the game: vampire-hunting goons, apparently, don't deserve the same level of blood-sucking jurisprudence as more fleshed-out NPCs. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An interesting, dense, ambitious game that sometimes overreaches. The only time it's okay to play with your food.

73

BELOW: "Aren't you a little young to be here?" Get used to that feeling.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$11

DEVELOPER
Sukeban Games

PUBLISHER
Ysbryd Games, PLAYISM

BITTERS SWEET

Mixing up in **VA-11 HALL-A: CYBERPUNK BARTENDER ACTION**

There's something lovely about matching drinks to your media of choice. Ale, cheese, and crusty bread when you play *Skyrim*. Yamazaki when you play *Yakuza*. And this is exactly what *VA-11 Hall-A* (from now on, for the sake of ease, *Valhalla*) encourages when you first fire it up.

It's a game that's best played after dark on a sticky summer's night, ideally with some kind of ice-cold beverage nearby. Finding a complementary drink is trickier, since the ingredients here are an inscrutable selection of spirits with names like Adelhyde, Flanergide, and Karmotrine, who sound like beautiful sisters on a Swiss space station. If you've worked in a real bar, you'll know that there's nothing relaxing about drink preparation, but it's different here; unlike real life,

where there is most definitely a time limit, you can take as long as you want in *Valhalla*. And there are no consequences for messing it up either. This means that the game is incredibly sedate. At times it feels like you're playing a smoky, cyberpunk version of the lo-fi study beats YouTube videos.

Occasionally, patrons will hint at what they want rather than telling you outright, which is as maddening here as I'm sure it is in real life. But most of the game plays out like a sassy, slightly-horny visual novel. The setting and vibes are immaculate, even if not every lascivious catgirl conversation is one that you'll want to tune into. In that respect, *Valhalla* does an accurate job of recreating what it's like to work in a bar where you have to listen to everyone's bullshit. ■

75

INN DEMAND

Having an ale of a time in **TAVERN MASTER**

Last in our collection of drink-adjacent games in *Tavern Master*, which means we've got all the essential liquids covered: blood, cocktails, and beer. Surprisingly for a medieval setting, the range on offer here is quite broad. Although if I travel back in time and ask for lemonade, I deserve to get burnt as a witch.

Tavern Master is so chilled out that it almost feels more like an idle game than a bawdy, fully-realised representation of a medieval inn, but it's compelling nonetheless. There's something irresistible about seeing piles of empty tankards on wooden tables as your gold counter ticks up. It requires very little in terms of micromanagement: the most reactive you get is adding more tables if it gets too busy or levelling up your diligent staff. And it rarely gets more

complicated than making sure that the paths are clear for your serving staff to efficiently waddle around the place with trays full of beer. It's pleasant stuff, but it doesn't quite scratch my granular desire to hear the crackling pork on the spit and see the foaming ale spilling from study barrels. I want something where I can almost smell the stale beer and hear the squeak of stools on grimy floors. *Tavern Master*, by comparison, is a bit too clean and peaceful. I'm not even close to joking when I say that my burgeoning inn, with one beer, four tables and a single candle, is a more attractive prospect than my local Wetherspoons; and that's even before I've unlocked the musicians. Perhaps that's the point, though. It's a game to be played with a fat wodge of cheese and pewter flagon resting on your beer gut. ■

65

BELOW: I would legit drink at a place that had a table full of bards.



NEED TO KNOW

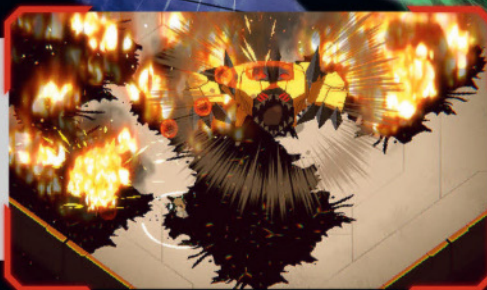
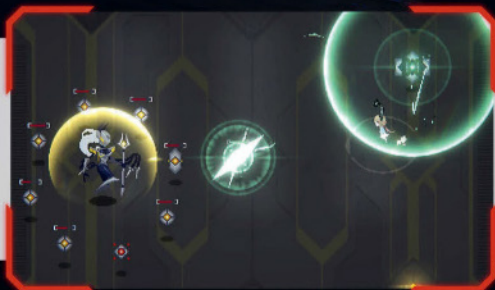
EXPECT TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
Untitled Studio

PUBLISHER
Untitled Studio

Nano Apostle

WISHLIST NOW



FEROCIOUS COMBAT. FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES. BRUTAL BOSSES.



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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

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Despite their popularity, handheld PCs raise some tricky questions.

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A streamlined rig that gets the core components right.



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BUYER'S GUIDE

Craft the best gaming rig for your budget with our ideal components guide.



GROUP TEST

PCIe 5.0 SSDs

It's finally time to consider one of these speed demons for your PC. *By Jacob Ridley*

Our advice to PC builders for the past year or so has been to largely ignore PCIe 5.0 SSDs. The best analogy I can come up with is they're like a car designed for drag racing: extremely quick but only in a straight line. Try to go around a corner and you'll quickly careen into the barrier. They're fast, but also hot and expensive. Or at least the first lot were.

Modern PCIe 5.0 drives have improved. They're no longer as hot or expensive. A few are genuinely affordable and there are a few more I'd even consider 'worth it'. We're still not quite at the tipping point for PCIe 5.0 replacing 4.0, but with new controllers rolling out, we're getting close.







P510 1TB

CRUCIAL £94

Actually affordable

1 Phison has put together an impressive controller in the E31T, but it's what Crucial has chosen to do with it in the P510 that earns our recommendation. It's not aiming for any speed records like the SN8100. Rather, it is all about value for money.

The P510 is the first PCIe 5.0 SSD we recommend as a straight replacement for a PCIe 4.0 one. It runs cool enough that most motherboards should be able to deal with the heat it spits out, lowering the requirement to spend big on a premium option. You still need a PCIe 5.0 compatible motherboard and

CPU, of course, but that's all modern chips today.

It might be affordable, but the P510 still delivers speeds worthy of a PCIe 5.0 drive. It's slower than the SN8100, but it's as fast as many other drives, even premium ones like Corsair's MP700 Elite. It does struggle with game load times, but it's not dissimilar to many other drives with similar random 4K speeds. Altogether, it's the budget PCIe 5.0 SSD to buy now.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Priced like PCIe 4.0
- Still quick
- Runs cool

SPECS CAPACITY: 1.2TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON E31T / **FLASH:** MICRON 276-LAYER TLC NAND / **ENDURANCE:** 600 TBW

Black SN8100 2TB

WD £220

Another level

2 Look, I shouldn't say this so near the start of a group test, but if you just want the best PCIe 5.0 SSD, you should stop reading here, at the WD_Black SN8100. It's unbeatable on most counts.

The fastest drive we've tested to date, the SN8100 excels in both sequential and random tests. It's the latter which matter most for games or running your OS; it means the drive is able to pick out small chunks of data from lots of different places at a faster pace than others. Since data is so often stored this way, rather than sequentially, that helps to reduce load times and

makes for a snappier desktop. The SN8100 is the first PCIe 5.0 drive to offer a genuinely impressive leap in 4K tests.

It uses Sandisk's SMI2508 controller and 218-layer TLC flash. It's a powerful combination; it's fast without warming up to an uncomfortable level. We're still talking upwards of 70°C, but providing your motherboard has a decent heatsink, it's not an issue, and cooler than some older drives.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Outstanding performance
- Quick load times
- Competitive price

SPECS CAPACITY: 1.2TB / **CONTROLLER:** SANDISK SMI2508 / **FLASH:** SANDISK 218-LAYER BIC8 TLC 3D CBA NAND / **ENDURANCE:** 1200 TBW

WE MEASURED
IT AT ONLY 60°C
DURING TESTING



GROUP TEST

9100 Pro 2TB

SAMSUNG £210

Paying for the name

3 It took a while, but Samsung has finally entered the PCIe 5.0 game with its very own in-house controller, called Presto. Samsung has pulled out all the stops for this drive, combining that controller with its own 256-layer TLC V-NAND and 2GB of LPDDR4X DRAM.

To be fair to Samsung, it does manage some stellar sequential speeds off the back of that controller and DRAM. It's right up there with the SN8100 and SK Hynix Platinum P51. Unlike the SN8100, however, it doesn't match that with equally high random 4K performance. It's in

the mix with the rest of the PCIe 5.0 drives; not bad, not great.

The same goes for game load times. Pretty good, nothing special. This drive gets toasty though: it reached 82°C in testing. That means it's only really worth it if you absolutely need those sequential write speeds, say you're a video editor and you move massive files around regularly. Otherwise, for gamers, it's largely wasted on us, and it's not cheap, either.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Impressive sequential reads
- Efficient
- High price

SPECS CAPACITY: 1-4TB / **CONTROLLER:** SAMSUNG PRESTO / **FLASH:** SAMSUNG 236-LAYER TLC V-NAND / **ENDURANCE:** 1200 TBW

Exceria Plus G4 2TB

KIOXIA £180

Cool running

4 The Kioxia (née Toshiba) Exceria Plus G4 is similar to the Crucial P510 in that it's powered by the Phison E31T. As a result, it doesn't get up to the high temperatures we've seen some drives reach under load. We measured it at only 60°C during testing – 15°C cooler than the SN8100. We tested the 2TB version of the Exceria Plus G4, hence the price jump versus the aforementioned P510. However, the 2TB version of the P510 is also cheaper than the Exceria, which altogether makes it a better pick. That said, if you do spot a good deal on the Exceria,

it's not all bad news. The endurance is rated to the usual 1200 TBW we see with many 2TB drives. The Exceria was one of the slowest of these modern PCIe 5.0 drives in sequential tests, however, and it doesn't make up for that with blazing random 4K speeds either: they're actually pretty low by comparison. Generally, I'd consider the Exceria Plus G4 only if the price was right – keep an eye on it in the sales.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great temps
- Weak random 4K
- One to watch

SPECS CAPACITY: 1-2TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON E31T / **FLASH:** KIOXIA 218-LAYER BIC8 TLC NAND / **ENDURANCE:** 1200 TBW



GROUP TEST

THIS DRIVE COMES
WITH A HEATSINK
ALREADY ATTACHED



BENCHMARKS

CrystalDiskMark 7.0.0

■ Sequential read (MB/s)

■ Random 4K read (MB/s)

Crucial P510 1TB



WD_Black SN8100 2TB



Samsung 9100 Pro 2TB



Kioxia Exceria Plus G4 2TB



Crucial T705 1TB



SK Hynix Platinum P51 2TB



T705 1TB

CRUCIAL £136

Old school

5 It should come as no surprise that the Crucial T705 runs a little hotter than others we've tested: this drive uses the older Phison E26 controller rather than the cooler E31T. Though sticking with the older controller isn't a bad thing for read/write speeds. In fact, Crucial has managed to eke out the top possible performance from the E26, seeing the T705 surpass 13,000 MB/s sequential read. That probably explains the heat, too. The good news is that this drive comes with a heatsink already attached to deal with the heat. The bad news is that this is

affixed to the drive in such a way as to make it difficult to remove, if not impossible, without risking damage to the drive.

Random 4K speeds are pretty good on the T705. Or at least they seemed impressive before the SN8100 came along. It's the best of the rest, anyways, and that might be down to the single NAND packaging included on the 1TB model. It delivers low latency in 3DMark's gaming storage test, too.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Includes heatsink
- Good speeds
- Toasty

SPECS CAPACITY: 1-4TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON E26 / **FLASH:** MICRON 232-LAYER TLC NAND / **ENDURANCE:** 600 TBW

Platinum P51 2TB

SK HYNIX £212

Something different

6 The SK Hynix Platinum P51 is something a little different, for the SSD connoisseur. A manufacturer of memory chips by trade, SK Hynix has decided to design its own controller here. That's probably down to its expertise in the field, and just a touch of trying to take market share left by its memory rival, Samsung.

It's good to see some fresh blood enter the arena. SK Hynix has come out of the gate swinging with the P51, too, offering huge sequential read and write speeds to match the best. It's also pretty solid when it comes to random 4K

performance – it would be the best if it wasn't for that darned SN8100. A thorn in the P51's side are its temperatures. The company has thrown everything at the performance crown and left nothing spare for improving efficiency. The drive hit 85°C in our testing, securing itself the anti-accolade of hottest of the lot. That means you need to have a chunky motherboard heatsink or, dare I say, active cooling prepared to handle it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Strong performance
- Quick load times
- Hot as heck

SPECS CAPACITY: 1-2TB / **CONTROLLER:** SK HYNIX ALISTAR / **FLASH:** SK HYNIX 238-LAYER 3D TLC NAND / **ENDURANCE:** 1200 TBW

Pictured: absolutely every game, from 2023 until forever. Thanks, UE5.

CODEBREAKERS

Threatened by homogeneity, PC gaming needs proprietary engines more than ever

Audio engineers will tell you a piece of music has 'that Pro Tools sound'. The track sounds cleaner, glossier, but overly digitised and brimming with artifice, they'll say, as you nod politely before being handed your change at the bar, putting a hand on their shoulder and giving them an 'enjoy your night, mate' before walking off.

In a similar way, PC gamers have all become accustomed to 'that Unreal Engine look'. You know the one. Really blurry textures for a half-second when your save game first loads. A faint plasticity look to every surface. More bloom than a garden centre. There are specific reasons UE games tend to look a certain way, like the material defaults that many developers don't change, and the multiplicative lighting solver that illuminates spaces in a distinctive way. The summation of those components, the recognisable look, used to be a fun little quirk, something you'd observe to yourself in the warmup phase of an *Unreal Tournament* match, or a massive gunfight that made you feel all clever in *BioShock*.

But somewhere along the way, as Unreal Engine's industry position changed from an option to the option, the quirk became a problem. Although it's not the case, it feels like every game we play was made on either Unreal

Engine 4 or, in the most exotic cases, Unreal Engine 5. 'That Unreal Engine look' has started to become 'that videogame look'.

BRAVELY DEFAULT

Homogenisation hurts games more than any other entertainment media form, because of their unique capacity for immersion. A good film can make you feel like you were somewhere you weren't, but a good game leaves you with memories of the routes you walked and the people you spoke to while you were(n't) there. So if the visual appearance of one game starts to look like any number of others you played lately, that effect pulls you out of a virtual world and makes you think of the tool they used to build it instead.

Separate to the uniformity of the look it produces, there's also the minor issue of numerous UE5 games releasing absolutely borked. *STALKER 2*, *MindsEye*, the *Oblivion* remaster and even *Fortnite*, the flag-waving poster child for Epic Games, all fell foul of arriving with poor framerates or performance-based instability, and a longer list still seems to rely on AI upscaling to make up for the shortfall in native optimisation.

That doesn't mean Unreal Engine 5 is bad, or that building a game in it consigns that game to poor performance. But those ill-fated releases and over-familiar look all contribute to a kind of gaming Groundhog Day effect. There's a sense that



United they stand

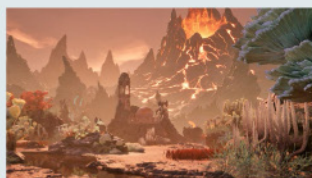
Note that Unity has yet to be mentioned, but is in fact far more commonplace in PC gaming. While 3,295 Unreal Engine games released in 2024 according to SteamDB, 8,907 games came out that were built in Unity. So why single UE out? Because UE games tend to be the more visible releases, with some marketing spend behind them. And because UE's dominant look is, well, more dominant than Unity's. *Cuphead*, *Ori* and *the Blind Forest* and *Hearthstone* were all made in Unity, for example.



FAR LEFT: With Sony's first-party treats like *Horizon* routinely coming to PC, we see more proprietary engines used.

LEFT: If you want to make something as esoteric as *Death Stranding*, you need the right tools.

ON THE OTHER HAND... Four games that mount a defence for UE



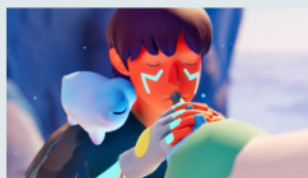
AVOWED

When it's wielded by old masters with a strong art direction, true beauty occurs. Like here, in fantasy RPG *Avowed*.



OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

A distinctive blend of 16bit pixel art and modern lighting. Looks – gasp – kind of different in its own way.



JUSANT

Minimalist. Colourful. Effortlessly cool, like an underground zine about climbing. It's UE in disguise.



GUILTY GEAR STRIVE

Cel-shaded chaos on a 2D plane. Looks like the 1990s game, was impossible in the 1990s.

we're all basically just playing the same fundamental experience, over and over again.

PROPS TO YOU

And then you look at the list of notable recent releases that used a proprietary engine instead: *Baldur's Gate III*. *Elden Ring*. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*. The modern *Dooms*. *Death Stranding*. The *Horizons* and the *Last of Us* games (*Lasts of Us?*). And you think to yourself, hang on – is all this Unreal Engine holding us back a bit?

Certainly, I'm cherry-picking. During the time it takes to read this, several games have probably released which weren't made in Unreal and which will make not the faintest imprint on the cultural landscape. But what's striking about the best examples of recent games running on a bespoke game engine is that they all wanted to do something differently.

Larian wanted an incredibly reactive platform for D&D storytelling that could handle *Divinity*-like battles, endlessly branching player choices, and a cinematic RPG experience all at once. FromSoftware wanted to bring enigma and wonder back to open worlds, packing *Elden Ring* with secret crevices and allowing you to approach much of the game in the order you improvised.

Warhorse wanted medieval Bohemia to be recreated with forensic diligence, architecturally correct down to minute details, and with a radial melee combat system unlike any other games'. Hideo Kojima wanted... well, it's still not clear what Hideo Kojima wanted, but whatever it

was, he succeeded in it and it's absolutely nothing like anything else in the medium.

In simplistic terms, it makes sense that in order to make a game that's distinct from the crowd, you'd build an engine that allows it to do those new and different things well. That statement loses a lot of nuance about what an engine is, and how developers use it. There are countless external component parts that plug into customer engines like Unreal and Unity, and they allow for a broad spectrum of genres and experiences.

THE MINOR ISSUE OF NUMEROUS UE5 GAMES RELEASING ABSOLUTELY BORKED

SENSE OF SAMENESS

Still, the evidence is in the end product. The fact remains that we're all experiencing a growing sense of sameness in bigger-budget titles, and that the games that offer the finest experiences have often been built for purpose from their very foundations. It takes longer. It's more expensive. At a

time when making games is harder than ever and both project cancellations and studio closures are depressingly commonplace, it doesn't feel right to demand that everybody start cutting from whole cloth. What we can do is vote with our wallets when the likes of *Metaphor: ReFantazio* turn up on proprietary engines. Gradually, we can send a message that giving studios the time and money to build experiences as they really want them to be realised is the formula for profit. That we care less about Lumen and Nanite than we do about a good concept, executed to a high standard, or a thought-provoking storyline. ■

Phil Iwanik

HIT THE DECK

Despite their overwhelming popularity, handheld PCs raise some tricky questions

Handheld PCs aren't a new phenomenon. Atari's Portfolio released in 1989, for example, with a full keyboard and a modified version of DOS called DIP-DOS that allowed it to more or less run as an IBM-compatible PC. Hewlett-Packard released the HP-95LX two years later which ran on DOS itself. But it doesn't feel like devices like those have been at the heart of PC culture, or even in particularly high usage, throughout the platform's long history.

Not until 2022, when Valve released the Steam Deck. As soon as the company behind *Half-Life* gave us a glimpse of what looked like a futuristic Game Gear and flexed its gigantic brand power biceps, we seemed to decide that handheld gaming PCs were a) a thing, and b) a fun way to play PC games. Well I'm not having it.

I know the world's against me on this one. Since the Steam Deck's release, Razer, Asus ROG, MSI, Lenovo, and Logitech G have all made a play for a slice of the handheld gaming PC pie with models of their own. People bought those models, and had a nice time with them. I'm not here to debate that. But I am here to say: it isn't PC gaming.

What hardware like the Steam Deck and its army of third-party reinforcements do, other than foster in us a pathological impulse to observe the nearest plug socket on every train and in every coffee shop, is that they ask us to define what a PC is, and what gaming is.

CONTROL SCHEME

I'll go further. Have you played *Stardew Valley* on a handheld gaming PC? Great, isn't it? It feels like the natural conclusion to everything Game Boy RPGs were working towards, a little world whose perfect vantage point is observed from above, peering down between two thumbs,

sitting somewhere comfy. Everything from the high-contrast pixel art to the simple button interactions feels right for a device like the Steam Deck. Not only does it definitely meet the criteria for PC gaming, it's also one of the all-time great examples of it.

However: I've also played *Control* on a handheld gaming PC. A precious, singular expression of Lynchian surrealism in playable form, a world where every conspiracy theory is true, and where the evidence of all of them is contained within one bureaucratic liminal space, rendered with

breathtaking fidelity by a Remedy team that can work magic with pixels like no other studio. Playing it on a handheld feels like peeking through the letterbox in the front door of an IMAX cinema to catch a screening. *Control* is also an all-time great example of PC gaming, and it doesn't work at all on a portable platform.

I'm not saying it's impossible to have fun with *Control* on a Steam Deck, but rather the level of fun you can have playing it on a bigger, more immersive screen is so much higher that it seems a shame to deprive yourself of that immersion. And that raises, perhaps, some old-school thinking about both the platform and the idea of 'PC gaming'.

NAMING CONVENTIONS

A personal computer is such a broad technological term, it's hardly useful any more. Let's be honest: we mean the liquid-cooled, RGB monstrosity in a glass-panel case we'll be paying off until 2037. A gaming PC is the manifestation of a passion for fiddling with technology and seeking out performance. It's a rejection of the closed ecosystem compromises and low performance ceilings that consoles offer. Generally we have some say over the specs that go into our gaming PC, whether we're the ones to actually build it or not, and we reserve the ability to upgrade it, piece by piece, over time.

HAVE YOU PLAYED STARDREW VALLEY ON A HANDHELD GAMING PC?



PHIL IWANIK
Techno-luddite
'lancer Phil takes pride in 'raw-dogging' train journeys without any entertainment media, sitting stock-still and staring into space. His current record is three stops on the Elizabeth Line.

POCKET ROCKETS *Four games that actually work for handhelds*



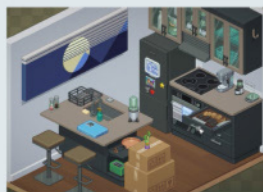
THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE!

Yes, perfect. A Yorkshire town, drawn in raucous colour and packed full of humour and puzzles.



VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

Not only does the bullet-hell survival roguelike feel natural to play on a handheld, it might even play better than on a desktop.



UNPACKING

You're not losing anything by playing this sedate meditation on arranging domestic spaces on a smaller screen.



PERSONA 5 ROYAL

By far the best exploration of Jungian psychodynamic principles available on handheld gaming platforms. Fact.



Handhelds... aren't that. They're not modular or customisable like desktop PCs are. They're not open ecosystems to the same extent desktop PCs are, because they often run on a modified OS and require specific per-game compatibility. Their default controls are analogue sticks, triggers and face buttons. Plugging in a mouse and keyboard is possible, but not practical. So why do we call them handheld PCs?

Probably because Steam made one, and marketed it in that way. Modern handhelds have as much in common with a PS5 as they do with a desktop PC from a hardware perspective, but they run on Windows, or SteamOS, and that seems enough to reassure us that peering into a minuscule screen to watch *Baldur's Gate III* run on medium settings while the battery drains like a lithium sieve constitutes PC gaming on the go.

I'm not saying bin them. I'm saying let's be real about what these devices are – a platform-agnostic supplement to our gaming main event. I'm glad they exist to help up smash out a *Persona* game on the train, but let's not call them gaming PCs. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



ABOVE: Is Phil so out of touch? No. It's the children who are wrong.

BELOW: Experiencing this Remedy meisterwerk on a handheld: a shame.



THE BUILD

Less is more

By Jacob Ridley



TOTAL COST £2,065

1

CASE



ProArt PA401 Wood Edition

Asus **£120**

Sticking a wooden panel on a chassis is a common occurrence these days, and I'm all here for it. Though Asus somehow makes it look even more tasteful than normal. The company has coated the Ash underneath in a dark, slightly glossy finish, and it's only

on closer inspection or bright direct light that you really get the feel for the wood itself.

It's a mixed bag for the PC Gamer team, as some like it, some wonder what's the point when it looks practically plastic, but I'm definitely in favour.

2

MOTHERBOARD



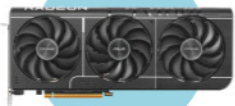
Aorus Pro X870E

Gigabyte **£324**

We're going for the X870E chipset, which offers massive connectivity and keeps AMD's top gaming chip in check.

3

GRAPHICS CARD



Prime Radeon RX 9070 XT OC Edition

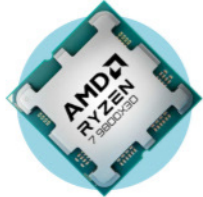
16GB GDDR6

Asus **£630**

AMD finally has a hit on its hands in the RX 9070 XT.

4

PROCESSOR

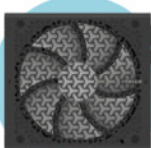
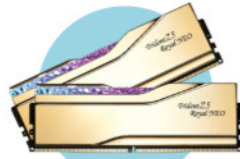


Ryzen 7 9800X3D

AMD **£420**

AMD has paired up with TSMC to stack more L3 cache beneath the CPU cores on the 9800X3D.



9	FANS	8	COOLER	7	POWER SUPPLY	6	SSD	5	MEMORY
 Included with case With two 160mm fans and one 120mm fan, the PA410 chassis offers everything we need. The two larger fans work a treat for moving heaps of air.	 Prime LC 240 ARGB Corsair £96 The PA401 chassis is limited on headroom, so the Asus Prime LC 240 ARGB is about as big as I can go.	 RM850x Corsair £135 My only complaint with Corsair's unit is the darn cable combs I have to install myself – WHY?	 Black Opal X570 Biwin £170 PCIe 5.0 SSDs are finally reaching critical mass, and affordable enough to make them worth it sometimes.	 Trident Z5 Royal Neo RGB 32 GB 6000 MT/s G.Skill £170 These are rapid, low-latency and blend in nicely.					

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

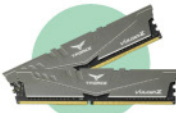
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,019

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £120 Intel's budget chip is still fantastic value and a solid all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 9060 XT 8 GB AMD £260 AMD delivers what we need for a 1080p gaming PC at a solid price, at least until even more budget GPU competition arrives.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £42 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 750W Be Quiet! £95 This 750W power supply gives you a decent dose of headroom for some future upgrades, from a trusted manufacturer.
SSD		SN7100 1 TB Western Digital £70 Superb 4K read performance for a reasonable price makes this a great drive for any gaming PC, never mind a budget one.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240N BenQ £150 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,614

MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £176 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £245 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RTX 5060 Ti Nvidia £400 Nvidia's RTX 50-series cards have been hard to find for good prices, but the 16 GB model is widely available, punchy, and affordable.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 2TB Lexar £110 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation, large capacity and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £200 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £45 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 X Hyperspeed Razer £60 The regular V2 is great if you can find one, but this version delivers impeccable gaming performance for less.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,909

MOTHERBOARD		MAG X870E Tomahawk MSI £300 With support for four M.2 drives, huge amounts of DDR5, Wi-Fi 7 and more, this mega mobo is specced to the hilt.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 9950X3D AMD £450 The Ryzen 9950X3D has more cores, but it's currently nearly double the price. For gaming? This chip makes much more sense.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 5090 Nvidia £2,200 The RTX 5090 price is ludicrous, but this is a money-no-object build and it's still the fastest GPU you can buy.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £125 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 You could always go for 64 GB if you really want to show off, but 32 GB of speedy DDR5 is still a sweet spot.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1300 Seasonic £410 The RTX 5090 is a thirsty beast, so you'd better give it a serious power supply – and this one's similarly monstrous.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £210 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,200 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £170 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V4 Pro Razer £170 The latest version of the DeathAdder isn't cheap, but when it comes to performance it's sensational.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURE

I've seen
Midsommar, I know
this ends badly.

Then she pulled me toward her and kissed me.

“Your techbro boss is absolutely ready to replace you with AI”

A job your parents won't understand is the most relatable part of **TRUER THAN YOU**

Truer than You is a visual novel about the gig economy. You're hired by a startup run by a techbro who wears 'fun' T-shirts in the office to complete vague tasks delivered via app. Sort of like Fiverr, but the jobs range from helping someone who might be an artist or might be a terrorist record a threatening video to being someone's plus-one at an event they don't want to attend alone like Jenny Got-No-Friends.

At the end of each gig you're given a score out of five, and it says something about how accurately it captured the Uber driver experience that when I got a four I responded with indignation that they'd docked, instead of relief that I'd scored well.

While some of the jobs are just 'drive me to a place' a lot of them are

JODY MACGREGOR



THIS MONTH
Learned the gig economy
wants you to conform.

ALSO PLAYED
Skin Deep, XCOM 2

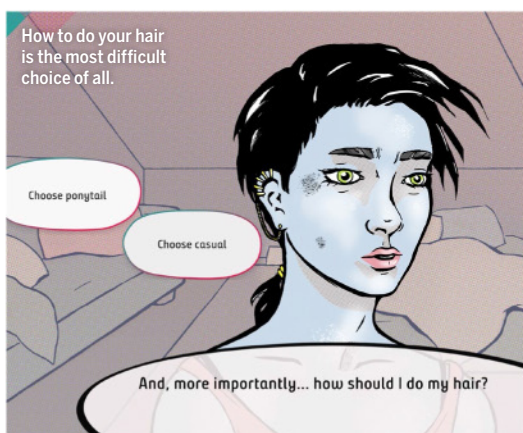
about performing gender. Which is relevant, because the protagonist is non-binary, yet constantly being hired by a wife who wants to be seen with a handsome young man to make her husband jealous, or two feminist radicals who want help with environmental awareness-raising and also a third for their polycule.

Decisions are made by choosing from speech balloons that fade away as you click through narration. You never know how many more will appear, so you have to choose between reacting quickly based

on the first couple of options, or potentially losing the first while waiting for a third or fourth to arrive. Simply letting them fade and not saying anything can be valid too.

You also have the option to pursue some gigs and not others. I ditched the jealous husband storyline because it had the worst writing, full of clunky phrases like, "I stopped to a halt". There's a stilted quality to some of it, which might be down to the developers being Swedish (references to lingonberry jam give it away), though in other places it reads more like deliberate awkwardness on the part of specific characters.

**DECISIONS ARE MADE BY
CHOOSING FROM SPEECH
BALLOONS THAT FADE AWAY**



SWIPE WRITE

Your techbro boss is absolutely ready to replace you with AI and forbids relationships with clients, but they're inevitable. Each morning you choose a task on your phone, which might include someone you met just wanting to hang out. On my first playthrough I joined the polycule, which led to an abrupt ending. Fortunately, *Truer than You* is short enough to play a couple of times in an evening so I went back and leaned into the mystery storyline instead.

You've moved to the city and taken this strange job while you track down info on someone called Yoon who was important to you, and who died recently after moving to the city himself. The relationship you have with Yoon and what happened to him are another thread to follow on your own time, and ultimately a more interesting one than all the dating.

It's a shame that it's missing quality-of-life features standard in Japanese visual novels, like a text log you can scroll back or the ability to fast-forward things you've already read. It tells you up front the story's written for replaying, but the UI could support that a little better. ■



"The way to play Half-Life today"

Enjoying the familiar wonder of **BLACK MESA**

ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Hit upgraded headcrabs with an upgraded crowbar.

ALSO PLAYED
Heretic + Hexen, Baldur's Gate II

OK, OK, so yes, I'd somehow let *Black Mesa* pass me by in the past five years since its original full release. I knew it was good, sure, but I'd played *Half-Life* so many times since 1998 that the idea of playing through the game once more didn't appeal. Plus, like all of us PC gamers, I had a backlog of new games to play that was haunting me. So, I didn't play it.

That all changed, though, when I saw *Black Mesa: Definitive Edition* reduced by a frankly ludicrous amount in this year's Steam Summer Sale (it was \$149/£149), with me pulling the trigger and picking it up. Even if it was just a simple glow-up of Valve's game-changing FPS, then I'd feel fine knowing that it had cost me basically nothing. It was an impulse purchase I could live with.

WHAT'S A HALF-LIFE?

But, as I'm sure all PC gamers reading this who have already played *Black Mesa* will be right now knowingly nodding about, this is far from a simple glow-up of the OG *Half-Life*. And, simply put, I've been

blown away by *Black Mesa* and its maker's collaborative vision and skill. The Crowbar Collective deserves every one of the 123,000 'Very Positive' reviews on Steam, as *Black Mesa* is now the way to play *Half-Life* today.

Visually, running at 4K 60fps on my rig, it obviously looks stunning, but it is how The Crowbar Collective has completely upgraded and, at times, reimaged parts of *Half-Life*'s Black Mesa facility, expanding it, while also keeping the feeling that this content was always there, implemented by Valve in the first release, that is the most spectacular achievement. It's a combination of being both heavy-handed, adding in large quantities of new material (specifically in the game's later levels) and kid gloves at the same time.

All the classic *Half-Life* set pieces are still here, too, obviously, and fighting the game's marines remains an exhilarating thrill ride but, for me, the thing I've liked best about playing *Black Mesa* is just drinking in the titular facility itself, which now feels more real, labyrinthine, and dauntingly exciting than ever. Honestly, I may never play the original *Half-Life* again. ■



“He’s the opposite of a cipher – a complicated, nuanced character”

Enjoying a Metroidvania hero with a sense of himself in **NINE SOLS**

As the influence of *Dark Souls* has swept across the indie gaming scene like a tidal wave, one of its most noticeable effects has been a glut of cipher protagonists. These heroes are mute, mysterious, and usually amnesiac – and often not even a person at all, but rather some kind of construct or undead.

It’s an easy set-up for Soulslikes and Metroidvanias – as you explore an unknown world and piece together its history, dangers, and mechanics, your silent avatar is as clueless as you are. Or if they do know more, they can’t say. There’s no need to frontload the game with character backstory or narrative set-up. You wake up in the dark in some horrible, sprawling labyrinth, and you’re ready to go. It worked for *Hollow Knight*, it worked for *Dead Cells*. But, there is another way...

Catching up on last year’s wonderful Metroidvania *Nine Sols*, I’m struck by how refreshing it feels that main character Yi does know more than me. He’s no mute, and as I pilot him around the game’s surreal

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Learned four different types of parry.

ALSO PLAYED
Europa Universalis IV,
Split Fiction

underground complex, his dialogue hints at the nature of his mission and his connections to the world.

HEART AND SOL

Why are we murdering our way through the ruling lords of this place? That’s something for me to figure out as we go, but it’s clear from the start that whatever Yi’s motivation is, it’s personal. As I bash my head against each boss fight, that sense that he’s really fighting for something frames the action in a totally different way.

And it’s a story that’s not as simple as just a hero taking down the bad

guys. Even without knowing the full context, it’s clear that there’s a sinister, cold side to Yi, and an implication that his motives might not be entirely pure. He’s the complete opposite of a cipher – a complicated, nuanced character with a deep and conflicted inner life.

Everyone around him is made richer themselves by proximity. Friends and enemies don’t simply monologue at a blank face, they have proper interactions with Yi. They’re given space to show off their personalities beyond just archetypes.

Listen, *Dark Souls* is great, but it has to be admitted that every NPC you can talk to in the series falls into the category of either Weird Little Guy or Mysterious Deliverer of Lore Snippets, and it’s a lovely change of pace to get to know characters that really feel like they have a life beyond just selling you health upgrades.

Yi’s personhood doesn’t make the world less intriguing, or the lore more intimidating – it just adds a bit of life and depth. A cipher protagonist worked perfectly in *Hollow Knight*, but *Nine Sols* is fantastic proof that not every imitator needs to walk the same silent path. ■

WHY ARE WE MURDERING OUR WAY THROUGH THE RULING LORDS OF THIS PLACE?



LEFT: I’m right there with you, Shennong.

BELOW: I might not always understand who I’m fighting yet, but as long as I know how to parry them, I’ll be OK.





“Notes fall down, you hit them in time to the music. Simple, but challenging”

Working your fingers (and brain) to the bone in **VIVID/STASIS**

More than any other group in the industry, I firmly believe that rhythm game developers are in it purely for the love of the medium, and few games support that claim better than *Vivid/stasis*.

Recently graduated from Early Access after years of updates and tuning, it is a rhythm game with hundreds of songs to play, an emotionally resonant mystery visual novel, a mind-bending collection of cipher-cracking ARG puzzles, a *Yume Nikki*-style exploration adventure and even finds time to sneak in virtual pet and fishing minigames.

The rhythmic mechanical heart of *Vivid/stasis* is a four-button music game in the style of *DJMax* or similar. Notes fall down, you hit them in time to the music. Simple, but challenging, as each of the nearly 200 tracks has multiple note-charts of increasing difficulty.

There are multiple ways to play, too, including multi-track ‘courses’, and a roguelite-inspired mode where

DOMINIC TARASON



THIS MONTH
Sent his fingers to a health spa to recuperate.

ALSO PLAYED
Dice Gambit, *Project Silverfish*

you pick from a series of game-warping challenges. It's an excellent soundtrack featuring plenty of guest musicians, and a compelling enough challenge to get me to pick up a Hitbox-style arcade controller to hammer out those notes just a little easier, making this possibly the most expensive free game I've played.

MIND-BODY INTERFACE

Thanks to an accessibility and options menu bursting with toggles, you could just experience *Vivid/stasis*

I'LL EVEN ADMIT THAT THE STORY GOT ME A LITTLE MISTY-EYED TOO

as a pure rhythm game, but then you'd miss out on a grand mystery adventure, starting out as a visual novel about several young women searching for a missing friend in Japan but escalating into much more esoteric, metatextual stakes. Clearing stages unlocks more story chapters, up until you hit a puzzle-lock.

And that's before you get to the pixel-art adventure segments. And the brutally hard boss stages, bending the rhythm mechanics into strange new shapes, integrating music directly into some of the biggest plot beats. There is just so much going on here, and I'll even admit that the story got me a little misty-eyed too.

Vivid/stasis is free on Steam, although it'll probably cost you some mental energy and more than a little wear-and-tear on your fingers. Worth it, though. Lead developer Cheryl Stelli is currently working on two more games – escape room adventure *Heartlodged* and traditional JRPG *Misdecayed*, both on Steam. Whatever she's charging, I'm in. I figure I owe her after losing dozens of hours to this musical marvel. ■

FINAL FANTASY XIV: PATCH 7.25

Struggling to keep up in a modern MMO world *By Harvey Randall*

After my years playing *Final Fantasy XIV* – years I've spent becoming increasingly disgruntled by a patch cadence that feels like it's moving through molasses, skewed content prioritisation, and a seemingly inability to get with the times – I think I've come to the conclusion that Square Enix's Creative Studio 3 is struggling to keep up. Not just when it comes to tempo, but when it comes to design.

But first, some context. Patch 7.25 released back in May, disembarking into some troubled waters. *Dawntrail*'s main scenario quest (MSQ) was ill-received, and in a game whose hype is kept afloat by an otherwise award-winning tale, that was a huge problem.

Gone was the hype machine of fans eagerly awaiting the next instalment – fanart and fanfiction and theorycrafting vanishing into thin air. What we were left with in the intervening patches was a game that, unless you were a hardcore raider, wasn't really giving you much to do.

This was the case in *Endwalker* as well, mind – but I was still coming off the high of one of my favourite fantasy stories ever told reaching its conclusion. The rose-tinted glasses were losing their lustre.

Back to the present day: the hope was that 7.25's Occult Crescent would turn that ship around, given it would be 'exploration content' – a big, open zone for players without static teams of raiding buddies to frolic around in. It came so close to crossing the finish, then promptly tripped itself, comically tripped, and broke its own neck two inches from the line.

A RAID FOR NO ONE

The problem was the Forked Tower, the zone's penultimate raid. While the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 27, 2013

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

LINK
finalfantasyxiv.com

Occult Crescent was designed to be soloable, something casual and midcore gamers could both pick up and play, the Forked Tower had some of the most baffling design decisions I've ever seen in an MMO.

To enter the Forked Tower, you need to level up to 20 inside the zone, buy a cipher, go to a special location under specific weather conditions, and then pay a cipher to load on in. All emergent gaming, all RNG, in-keeping with the philosophy of killing monsters with strangers.

Except, when players got inside, they found a raid with incredibly punishing mechanics that required players to heavily coordinate, and mandated specific phantom jobs (the zone's progression system) to get past certain mechanics. The kicker? It only lets you die a limited number of times before punting you out.

"Oh, so it's for coordinated pre-made groups," you might say. Well, no. You can't make a premade for it because you can only enter the Occult Crescent in groups of eight, and between 30-48 players are advised for the raid.

I cannot tell you who this raid is for, and the numbers 23 days later in a live letter from the producer revealed that no one else was really sure, either. In nearly a month, 400 clears had been made – which, doing the maths with some estimations provided by a long-standing fan census, means less than 2% of active players actually saw the damn thing. It's no surprise that Square Enix is

A RAID WITH INCREDIBLY PUNISHING MECHANICS

rushing out patches to change it. And yet, Forked Tower's failings aren't just a result of poor design, they're a result of Creative Studio 3's inability to meet its own design choices in the middle.

FFXIV has, traditionally, alternated its patches between accessible and hardcore content – and on a patch cycle that's four-to-five months long, you just can't expect folks to wait around with eight- or ten-month gaps in between the thing that's made for them.

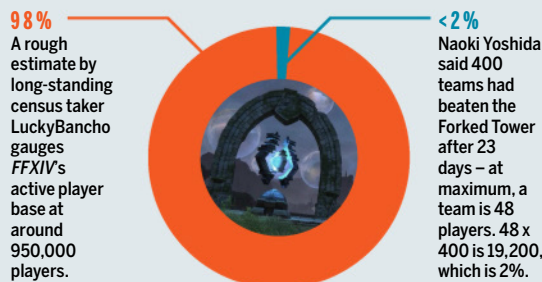
If *World of Warcraft* has become a pleasantly-sloped mountain, with scalable difficulties in Mythic+ and Delves, then *Final Fantasy XIV* is a jagged range with stagnant pools and insurmountable peaks. Content is either so easy you could do it in your sleep, or so hard only the toughest players will manage it. Which just isn't how things are done any more.

There's hope, though. Patch 7.35 has already boasted that its headline feature, a Deep Dungeon with 100 floors, will be designed "for everyone" – and it's already a marked improvement, letting casual players clear all 100 floors with a matchmade party, while also adding scaling difficulties to its final bosses for the sweats.

I live in hope that director Naoki Yoshida can turn this ship around, even if it's been heading towards an iceberg of its own making for years. ■

THE WHAT NOW?

Who beat the Forked Tower after 23 days?



Note: The Forked Tower lets up to 48 players enter it, so the 2% guesstimation is a best-case scenario. Chances are, it's lower still.

"This lantern is small, those ones are far away."



FAR LEFT: At the very least, the Occult Crescent is a pretty place to grind in.





SMASH REMIX

The Super Smash Bros of your dreams, assuming you haven't slept since Y2K. *By Justin Wagner*

S *mash Remix* goes back to 2019 when it replaced Captain Falcon with his slower counterpart Ganondorf, but six years' worth of updates have brought the roster up to 30 regular fighters and 16 'bonus' fighters that skew stronger and sillier, like Lanky Kong and the piano from *Super Mario 64*.

This is not a fan game, but a patch that runs as easily on a RetroArch core as it does on your dust-stained Nintendo 64. As long as you've got a way to transfer your *Super Smash Bros 64* cartridge's ROM onto your PC and then back onto an SD card (to slap into a custom N64 cart like an Everdrive), you can run *Remix* natively on original N64 hardware.

The new character picks are strategic, as if they treated a 1999 Blockbuster rental section like a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
January 1999

DEVELOPER
HAL Laboratory

PUBLISHER
Nintendo

LINK
ssbwiki.com/Smash_Remix

shopping list for character ideas. Any anachronisms, like Lucas and Dark Samus, are tucked into a side menu as bonus characters; the vast majority of new additions are era-appropriate all-stars like Sheik and Goemon, who you could picture making it into the original if HAL Laboratory had been given free rein to do whatever it wanted and a lot more time to do it. Even a character like Wario, who was added in later *Smash* games, has had his motorcycle and farts stripped away since those elements weren't really part of the character until *WarioWare* came out.

It's also a chance to retroactively add regular *Smash* favourites such as



CHARACTER STUDY

Brush up your knowledge



GOEMON

The Ganbare Goemon series goes back to the '80s, but N64 grognards will remember him from *Mystical Ninja Starring Goemon*, a surreal action platformer. Great hair.



EBISUMARU

Also checking in from Ganbare Goemon, Ebisumaru is like the Costello to Goemon's Abbott. His taunt lets you whip out a camera and snap a picture, which will daze anyone caught in the light.



MAD PIANO

If you ever woke your parents up playing *Super Mario 64* because you let out a skypiercing terror shriek, you are familiar with the Mad Piano. If you haven't, well, it's a piano with teeth.



DRAGON KING

Dragon King isn't actually from another game; he's taken from the model used to test *Super Smash Bros* before it was agreed Nintendo characters would star. Check his alt skins too.



TOP: If Mario is a doctor, a plumber, and a royal, I don't think he needs all those coins for himself.

RIGHT: I'm gonna have a hard time going back to a Bowserless version of this game.



Peach and Bowser, sure, but *Mischief Makers'* Marina and the eponymous star of *Conker's Bad Fur Day* are exciting because they're hallmarks of the long-gone paradigm this mod celebrates. In 20 years, there's a pretty good chance players will still boot up *Smash Ultimate* and muse, "Who the hell is Byleth?" *Remix* supplies *Smash 64* with a host of new favourites, as well as the Byleths it never got.

Its incredibly ambitious scope – 34 new playable fighters, a reworked arcade mode, heaps of new maps and items, as well as several new multiplayer game modes – guarantees that *Smash Remix* would still be pretty cool even if it were a cluttered mess in practice. But to *Remix's* credit, it leaves the original roster and stages untouched, keeping them as a yardstick for balance.

Even complete newcomers fit remarkably well, too; it's easy to imagine someone seeing *Remix's* take on Conker and wondering if he was, in fact, in the initial release back in the day. The result is I'm never met with an uncanny voice in my head reminding me what's fanmade and what's not – even the original announcer Jeff Manning lends his eager shouts to call the names of new characters. It all just blends together into one glorious simian brain scratcher. But if you're the sort that likes *Smash 64* as it is, and all this novelty strikes as you as pomp, there's still plenty in *Remix's* suite of additions that make it feel like the definitive fanmade patch.

FIFTH-GEN FISTICUFFS

Playing a 2D fighter alone can feel lonelier than going solo in other genres. There's usually a blinking text box that says "2P PRESS A TO JOIN" or some such to drive home that half the fun is in competition with another fleshy human you can yell at in meatspace, and the enemy CPUs tend to be either so pathetic basic strategies will utterly clobber them or so unforgiving that you'd swear they're cheating. *Smash 64* had the former problem, with AI opponents useful primarily as training dummies, and that's why I was surprised to load up *Remix's* 1P mode and get thrashed by a Mewtwo CPU so aggressive it's like he heard me talking trash about CPUs.

For every solo mode in the original game, *Remix* has a more customisable counterpart. The remixed versions of Break the Targets and Board the

Platforms allow players to choose any character and new stages, and Classic mode has more fights, new bosses, and a steeper difficulty curve. A number of *Melee*-inspired modes were added as well, like the Home Run Contest, the horde-clearing Multi-Man mode and its hyperdifficult "cruel" counterpart, and regular battles that use HP instead of *Smash's* signature percentage buildup system.

Multiplayer modes have been similarly beefed up. King of the Hill and Smashketball are complete shakeups of the *Smash* ruleset that lean harder into the series' party game roots than ever, and 12-character battle is the sort of head-to-head matchup knowledge check that'll keep any aspirant tournament winner busy for awhile.

Of course, nothing will beat netplay on a PC emulator with



IT DOESN'T FIDDLE WITH A FEW EQ KNOBS AND CALL IT A DAY

improved resolution and a better input method than the gnarled alien claw that is the Nintendo 64's original controller. But if consoles are your thing, I'm sure it's a real treat to see Sonic go full Bob Odenkirk on Mario like it's 1999.

It's easy for nostalgia trips to mask a missing identity with bleary-eyed memories of yesteryear, but *Smash Remix* steps over that pitfall by packing in so many ambitious modes and new toys to play with. Like a good remix album, it doesn't just fiddle with a few EQ knobs and call it a day: it treats the original work like a malleable collage of ideas, emboldened by clear knowledge of what makes it tick, and rearranges the pieces in all sorts of new ways until they fit together again.

On the surface, it looks like a big buffet of popular characters thrown into an old game with wild abandon, but under the hood, it's a careful and polished iteration that doesn't rock the boat so much as it decks the boat out with new furnishings and take it on a tour of the world. And if you favour a more patient, simpler sort of platform fighter, it's easily among the best ways to play *Smash 64*. ■



GET STARTED IN GROUNDED 2

Brave Brookhollow Park and its countless creepy crawlies. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
10 hours

VITAL LINKS

Best base locations:
shorturl.at/G4xgW

Best weapons and
armour: [pcgamer.com/
games/survival-
crafting/grounded-2-
best-weapons-armour/](https://pcgamer.com/games/survival-crafting/grounded-2-best-weapons-armour/)



ON A MISSION

1 The best starter tip in *Grounded 2* is to focus on progressing the main mission chain. These objectives act as a tutorial to get yourself settled in Brookhollow Park and will walk you through crafting vital equipment, base structures and staying alive.



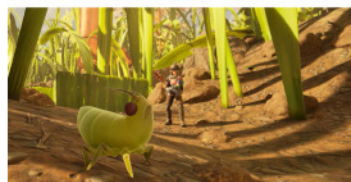
OVERANALYSE

2 Another key to survival is discovering technologies that you craft with *Grounded 2*'s ingredients. Make sure to analyse everything you find at the terminals in each Ranger Outpost, as this will unlock new crafting schematics, and earn you Raw Science.



THIRSTY WORK

3 Clean water is far harder to find than food in Brookhollow Park. Look for tasty H₂O droplets hanging from grass, and whack the stem to knock them down. You can either chug them down straight away, or craft a canteen to store water using Grub Hide and Crude Rope.



GOOD GRUB

4 Food is another priority if you want to stay healthy (and living) in the park. While you can subsist on tiny raw mushrooms, you'll want to build a cooking spit and start roasting bug meat in the form of Weevils and Aphids. Purchase the Cooking 101 bundle at a Ranger Outpost.



BUG BUGGY

5 Riding a Soldier Ant or Orb Weaver Spider is a great way to get around. You'll unlock the Red Soldier Ant through the Egg Hunt main mission, and the spider mount later on, so it's worth pushing until you acquire one of them before you start exploring.



YEAH SCIENCE

6 Beyond analysing resources, you can also find big pink blobs of Raw Science around the map, including some tucked away in hidden (and often dangerous) locations. You can use this resource to purchase recipes in the Science Shop.



BATTLING BUGS

7 Acquiring more bug materials requires you to splat them in combat, which can be quite hard depending on the size of said insect. I'd suggest crafting a hammer to use in combat like the Red Ant Club as these weapons deal high damage.

ON THE CASE *Burgle the Picnic Table briefcase*



2

CRACKING THE CODE

For those wondering where you find the codes, the first one is written on a newspaper on top of the Picnic Table, close to the briefcase.

3

SO WHAT'S INSIDE?

Hopping into the briefcase, you'll find a Milk Molar you can smash, as well as some mint and spicy candies.

1

DIAL IT UP

The combo for the briefcase is 137, 514, which is to say, 137 is the left lock combination, while 514 is the right one.



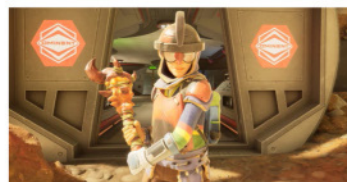
MUTATIONS

8 Another way you can harden yourself in *Grounded 2* is by equipping mutations. You earn these special buffs by performing actions. Since you unlock these based on stuff you're doing over and over, it's likely they'll be pretty useful for your playstyle.



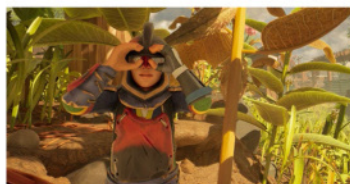
MILK MOLARS

9 Once you have the Omni-Hammer upgrade, you can smash these tooth-shaped sweets around the park, absorbing their tasty cores to gain upgrade points you can spend on health, stamina, hunger, healing, or to increase your max mutations.



TANKED UP

10 If you find that your weapons and armour aren't quite enough to mash any bug baddies, don't forget you can upgrade them. You'll need to track down some Brittle Quartzite Shards and Brittle Marble Shards, and you can then craft upgrades at the workbench.



BASED

11 Picking a good spot to put down roots is very important. You might want to start building a base right next to the Ranger Outpost: Snackbar, close to where you start, but don't feel you have to. You can always explore a bit and find a better spot.



WHAT AILS YA?

12 You'll have to contend with various status effects, such as chill in the Ice Cream Van, gas in the Trash Can, or sizzling in the Fire Pit. You can craft gear to deal with these, the materials for which come from Bees, Stinkbugs and Bombardier Beetles.



THE ART OF ILLUSION IN THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION REMASTERED

PART 1

Is it possible to survive in Oblivion with nothing but stealth, Starlight and misplaced self-confidence?

By Matt Elliott



I've always had a problem with magic in the *Elder Scrolls* games. The first character I ever rolled was a knight in *Morrowind*, born under the Ritual birthsign. I picked that because I thought it would literally let me turn undead (as opposed to just frightening them away). I eventually did turn undead by accidentally contracting Porphyric Haemophilia, but that's a diary for another day. This avoidable and childlike misunderstanding instilled within me a deep distrust of the arcane arts. I've avoided magic ever since, instead always choosing to roll simple knights or stealthy archers. But that's about to change.

The sensible way to learn to love magic would be to create a character with a deep and compelling mastery of magic; a caster who showcases the most dynamic and exciting spells in the *Elder Scrolls* universe. But we're not doing that. Instead, we're going to use the most complex, superficial, and sporadically unhelpful school of magic there is: Illusion. An obvious confession, up front: this is not my idea. It's a naked rehash of Tom Francis' An Illusionist in *Skyrim*, first featured in PC Gamer in 2012. A lot has changed since then, however. We've had around 54 versions of *Skyrim* and a handsome remaster of the most disappointing *Elder Scrolls* game of them all, *Oblivion*. But it remains a wonderful idea. No weapons. No armour. No punching. No direct attacks whatsoever, in fact.

Before any of that, though, my favourite bit: character creation. The Illusion school is all about showmanship: its spells charm, enrage, captivate, and confuse; and some make funny little dancing lights dance around your head. Its governing trait is Personality. To my mind, then, we need a character with dash and elan. The sort of hero whose success is predicated on making the world believe he's something he's not. He's like a wedding magician who's accidentally stepped into a high-stakes fantasy world. So say good day to... Crispin the Preposterous.

I make Crispin a Breton, because I want to move away from the elven sorcerer trope, and Bretons feel like the most deliciously flamboyant race in Tamriel. Also: they're really good at magic and I need all the help I can get. To

this end, I also chose The Mage as my birthsign, which is extremely cheesy, but I'm using it as character inspo. Crispin believes he was destined for greatness. It was written in the stars. I give him a fantastic mop of chestnut curls and a moustache designed to distract you while he switches the playing cards. And it's around now that I realise he's basically identical to every custom character I've made for PC Gamer diaries.

SEPTIM PIERCING

This leads me to the first issue I've always had with *Oblivion*. I kind of hate the start. Patrick Stewart is

I'M AN ILLUSIONIST WITH NO SPELLS; A HUMAN CONFIDENCE TRICK

obviously amazing, and I love the sneering prick in the cell opposite, but it's the opposite of everything I loved about *Morrowind*, in which I felt I could be a small, personal element in a larger world. *Oblivion*, by comparison, makes me the centre of the universe. I don't want your amulet, Uriel, you wizened old traybake. I'm Crispin the Preposterous. Don't lay that shit on me. But lay his shit he must, and on me, so when I finally escape the sewers I already feel guilty about ignoring the dead emperor and dooming Tamriel.

Another problem becomes immediately clear: I can't do anything. I have no offensive spells. Even rats are a danger to me, let alone goblins. This means that my first few minutes are spent squatting in the gloom while other people do the fighting; a theme we'll return to a lot. It also leads to an unintentionally hilarious moment with Bauros, who confidently asserts that, having watched me 'fight', that I must be a Bard. No, Bauros. I'm an Illusionist with no spells; a human confidence trick.

That's a slight lie. I leave the sewers with one trick I can use: Starlight. A simple light spell that I got from picking Illusion as a major skill in my custom class.

The problem is that my continued existence is down to my ability to hide, rather than draw attention to myself with a shimmering light show. But, despite this, I cast Starlight about once a second, just to keep my level ticking up. Yes, it's useless. And no, I don't have any reason to have a high Illusion skill, because I don't have any other spells. But please let me have this fleeting moment of self worth.

SHELLFISH GIANT

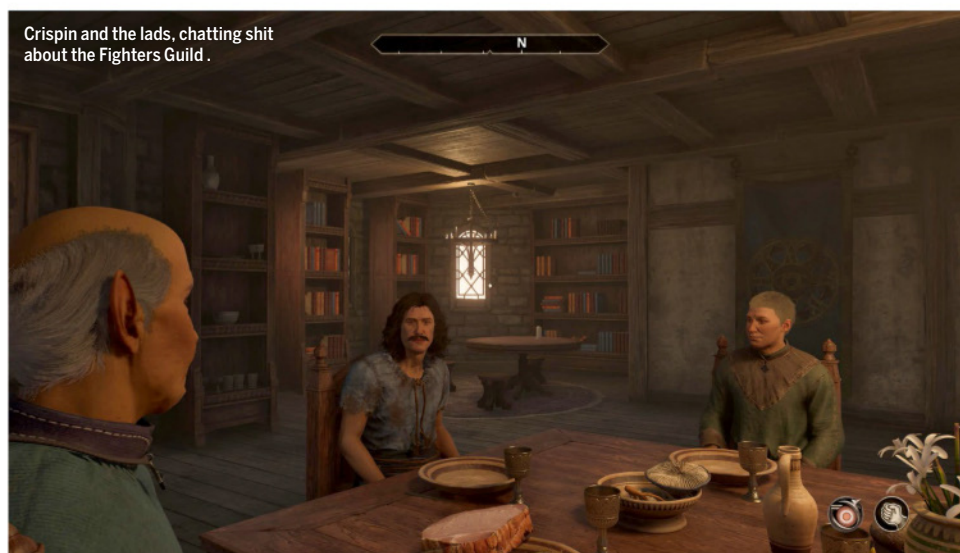
That feeling doesn't last. I soon realise everything can kill me. Less than an hour into the game and I'm fleeing from a mudcrab that caught me while I was trying to navigate the shores of Lake Rumare. Having literally no offence is probably the most stressful way to play an *Elder Scrolls* game. The battle theme never stops playing because there's always

THE RULES

1. Illusion only. Spells from any other class are forbidden.

2. No fighting whatsoever. And that includes unarmed combat.

3. No armour. You're an illusionist. Magic is your only protection.



Crispin and the lads, chatting shit about the Fighters Guild.

➤ something chasing me. I'm not even joking when I say that it's playing in my head as I write this. It's taking years off my life.

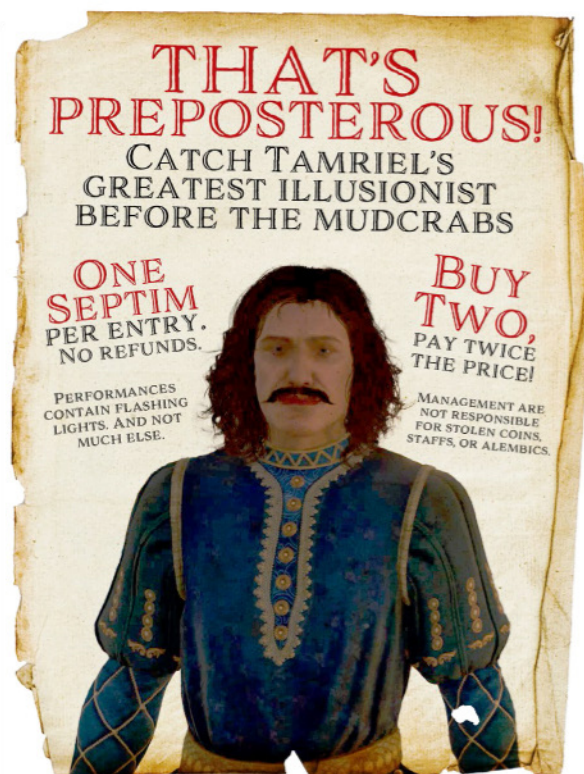
My tactic is to keep running until I reach a guard, and to that end I head to the Imperial City, with the intention of visiting the Arcane University: an obvious place to go for a talented and charming illusionist like Crispin. Except when I get there, I can't even join the Mages Guild. It's like trying to buy a sausage roll from the Greggs head office. Insulted and annoyed, I head to Edgar's Discount Spells, the Shoezone of magic wholesalers. And the only Illusion spell Edgar sells is obviously the shittiest one: Starlight. My only option is to flee to another town. Exit, pursued by a mudcrab.

I trudge my way to Chorrol, followed by three wolves, with the battle music playing the entire time. I wish I was joking. But I get a moderately warm welcome when I arrive, and decide that this is the correct (or perhaps only) path for Crispin. The Mage's Guild will give me access to spells worthy of Tamriel's greatest living illusionist. I treat myself to a cheese wheel, a bottle of ale and my first night's rest in a proper bed. And in the morning, I get my first assignment: speak to a woman about a book. Even Crispin can manage that.

My mission is to talk to Earana about the Fingers of the Mountain, a mysterious tome that my Guildmaster, Teekeus, greatly desires. Crispin doesn't care, but it might be a shortcut to some sweet to Illusion spells. Also: it sounds easy. I trudge up a nearby mountain to recover the book... and die on the way down because I jumped too high while descending the path. New rule: no jumping.

TOME DEAF

I'm one quest in and I've already reached a classic *Elder Scrolls* conundrum. Do I give the book to Earana or Teekeus? I mostly hate both of them. In the end, I make a choice that defines who Crispin the Preposterous is: neither. I hand over the tome to Earana, who spends some time translating it... then I steal it back. Because all that time spent cowering and hiding means that Crispin is a pretty effective thief. No, it doesn't require any Illusion spells; but it doesn't not require them, either. Don't think about that one. Look! Here's another paragraph.



I hand the stolen book back to Teekeus, and get a slight telling off, but honestly, who cares? Not Crispin. It sadly doesn't lead to any new spells or enough money to buy new spells, but it's worth it for the cheese wheels and comfy beds. But it's time for Crispin to move on. There has to be a more effective place for him to ply his trade. I chose Bravil, a swampy town to the south of Cyrodiil. To be honest, the Mages Guild here is a bit of a hovel; the humid surroundings mean that the walls are thick with mould. It'll have to do. A few hours ago Crispin was in prison, so he can live with a bit of slum landlord chic, especially since the Guildmaster here actually needs him to use his skills as an illusionist.

My task involves retrieving a stolen staff back from an excellently named Varon Vamori, who sounds like a Bond villain with a blocked nose. I get to use some charm scrolls on him, which is the first task I've had which is adjacent to Crispin's skill set. Also, it's quite amusing giving people the faint green glow of a foul-smelling comic-book character. Sadly, as with the quest above, it isn't simple: the staff has been sold and I need to retrieve it. This sounds pleasantly simple and not very dangerous, which is very much Crispin's vibe, even if the journey back to the Imperial City results in yet another Benny Hill-style chase sequence.

Retrieving the staff is simple enough, but once again, it feels more





ABOVE: How the goblins look at you when all you can cast is Starlight.

RETRIEVING A STOLEN STAFF BACK FROM AN EXCELLENTLY-NAMED VARON VAMORI

like a job for a petty thief than an illusionist. Luckily, Crispin is both. He uses the charm scrolls given to him to find out exactly where the loot has been stashed, and uses his increasingly prodigious sneaking and lockpicking skills to steal a key and retrieve the goods. It's moderately satisfying stuff, but it really doesn't feel like I've actually needed to use my magic for this. Which is probably a good thing, since Starlight doesn't have any practical application whatsoever.

STAFF PARTY

The staff is safely returned and I'm actually rewarded with a second Illusion ability, Captivate, which sounds powerful but is actually just a slightly tepid Charm spell. Crispin was captivating enough already, thank you very much. I'm also on the cusp of making my first actually useful purchase, Touch of Frenzy, which sounds like a fancy boutique cologne. I can't help but think, as I steal enough alembics to purchase the new spell, that perhaps my relationship with the Mages Guild is a dysfunctional one. I'm also getting an overwhelming sense of spell

envy: the best I can ever hope for is an ability that will make me invisible. Meanwhile, those vulgar Destruction oiks get an ability literally called Enemies Explode. But rules are rules, and Crispin is at peace with his choices. Elegant spellcraft for a more civilised age.

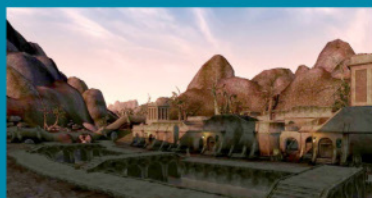
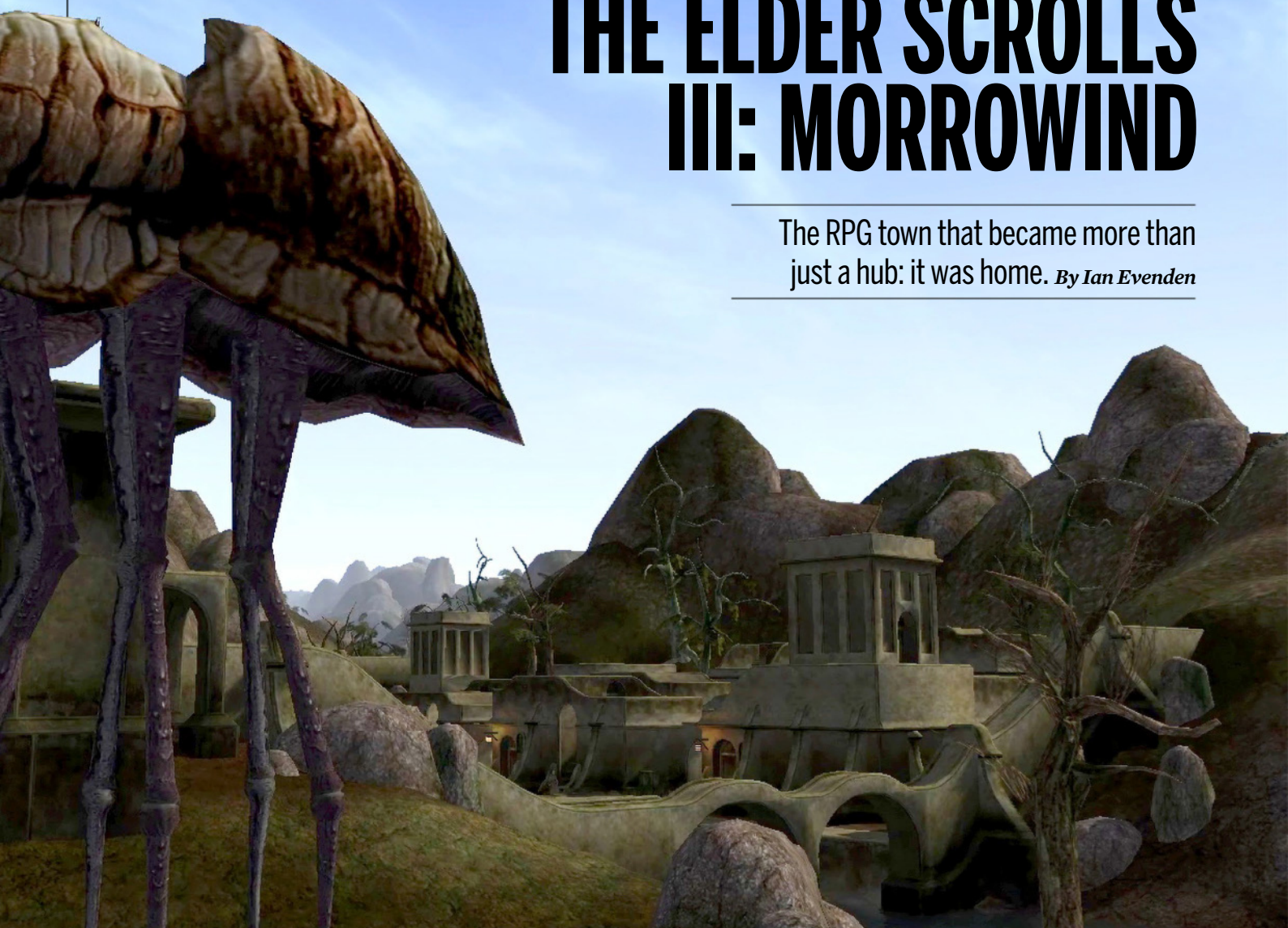
There's a bigger issue than comparison being the thief of joy, however: I don't feel like a proper illusionist. Very few of the problems I've had to face have required me to use any magic. Crispin's, ahem, natural charm has been enough. And we haven't been anywhere dark enough for Starlight to be useful, if indeed it's conceivable that it ever will be. In fact, I haven't really had to do anything except run away, steal, lie, and flatter. Perhaps, then, Crispin's biggest falsehood is exactly this: he doesn't actually need to do any magic to ascend to the upper echelons of the Mages Guild. This could be the most magnificent deception of them all. ■



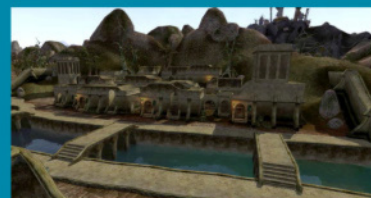


BALMORA, FROM THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

The RPG town that became more than just a hub: it was home. *By Ian Evenden*



LEFT: The silt strider remains one of gaming's best ever fast travel options.



You have to start somewhere. And in *Morrowind*, that place is always the port of Seyda Neen. The ship that carries you from prison docks there, and you're sent into the customs house for some character creation and light pilfering. From there, however, you're on your own, a package-delivery quest pointing you to the town of Balmora and a man called Caius.

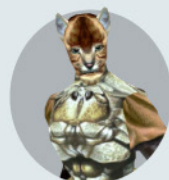
The world of *Morrowind* is huge and open. Its towns and cities exist as islands in a dangerous sea of wastelands and ash fields, and so your journey to Balmora is best undertaken quickly unless you want to fall prey to one of the most annoying creatures in videogames, cliff racers. You can take the silt strider for a few coins, an enormous chitinous flea piloted by a dark elf, and be in Balmora before you know it, just a loading screen away. You'll miss out on so much by doing this, though. It's not a long walk, and there are plenty of places to pick up weapons to fend off the cliff racers.

Take care to avoid being hit by the wizard who falls out of the sky, and you'll arrive at your destination. Balmora isn't going to win any prizes for its architecture. Compared to the remarkable Ald'ruhn with its town centre made from the shell of a giant crab, or Sadrith Mora with its council hall supported by mushrooms, House Hlaalu is a business-minded house, and has built a sensible settlement that has been allowed to grow into a successful town. The buildings may all be similar, influenced by Imperial ideas of mass production, but each one belongs to somebody.

DARK CORNERS

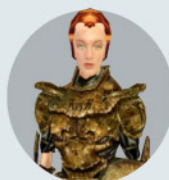
Balmora is your friend, but not many of its inhabitants are. The dark elves' sneering greeting as you approach them, or questions as to what you are

FRIENDS OR TRAITORS *Who's who on the streets of Balmora*



SUGAR-LIPS HABASI

Thieves Guild leader is a master trainer and source for tools – but only if you're a guild member.



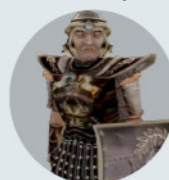
EYDIS FIRE-EYE

The Fighter's Guild boss also worships a daedric prince and serves the local crime syndicate.



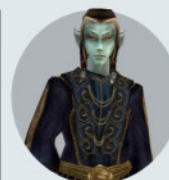
CAIUS COSADES

The reason you're here: an old drug addict and ab-toting gym enthusiast who is also the imperial spymaster.



LARRIUS VARRO

Imperial Legion champion at the fort just outside Balmora. Encourages you to create a bloodbath of criminals.



RANIS ATHRYS

Steward of the Mages Guild and your go-to elf if you want magical training in the early game.

doing there, points to a distrust of outsiders from the locals that comes from past invasions and fears about what the influx of humans means.

Your contact, Caius, is a human spymaster living under the cover story of a hopeless junkie. He never wears a shirt, and an estate agent would describe his home as a cosy bedsit in need of some updating. More importantly, he offers you the use of his bed, and it's this that grounds you in the world. Caius sets you up with a base, some gold, and then sends you out into the world again to enjoy yourself. And you soon

links to many more. More importantly, though, it's a wonderful sight as you jog back to it. The imposing Imperial Fort Moonmoth that stands to its south is the largest fortification you've seen thus far, and provides a feeling of protection. You know you're safe once within its walls – assuming you're not a wanted criminal by this early stage.

SHADE AND RESHADE

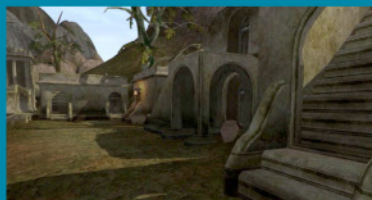
Sure, there are sights to behold in *Morrowind* that will take your breath away. It's one of the games best served by a high-res texture pack, as its looks betray the expectations of players' PC graphics cards of the time. But Balmora's dumpy buildings and xenophobic locals, its manors and working class district, and even its shady bars once you've cleansed them of criminals, provide an area of a game marked by dust and ash that's simply nice to be at home in.

And of course you'll leave Balmora behind you. There's an island the size of a small continent to explore, a world-changing plot and umpteen side-quests to follow. But sometimes it's nice to go back to where you came from, watch the sun going down over the river, and knock a cliff racer out of the sky with a single fireball – just for old times' sake. ■

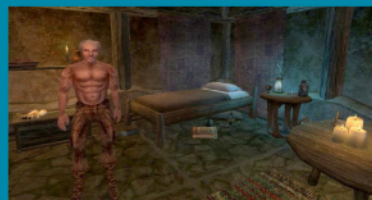
BALMORA IS YOUR FRIEND, BUT NOT MANY OF ITS INHABITANTS ARE

find that everything you need is right there in town.

As an early hub town in a huge RPG, Balmora is a total success. It sets you up with quests, provides guilds to join, shops to trade with, trainers to learn skills from, inns to pick fights in and a hint of the society's shady underworld. It sits at the confluence of four of the island's regions and has roads and transport



RIGHT: Caius' home is basic, but it's a great place to do drugs. He should know.





One of the most undeservedly
unknown and underrated games

After bonding with Arokh, the dragon and Rynn are one.



DRAKAN: ORDER OF THE FLAME

A classic action-adventure PC exclusive that still brings the heat. *By Robert Jones*

You're Rynn, a slender and agile warrior who has, barely, survived her village being raided, sacked and burned to the ground by the orcish forces of Navaros, a fallen evil sorcerer set on resurrection and world domination. Everyone you knew or loved in the village is dead, slaughtered by the Wartok horde. Fallen men and women lie broken within burning buildings, which stand charred and wrecked, while crop plantations lie in ashes at your feet. There is one survivor, though, your brother Delon, who has been kidnapped by Navaros' minions and whisked away to act as the vessel for Navaros' return. And, as you stumble to your feet and grab your sword, his rescue is the only thing in your mind.

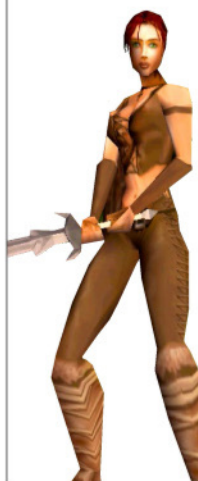
Of all the PC games that I've seen come and go over the last 30 years or so, I think *Draakan: Order of the Flame* is one of the most undeservedly unknown and underrated. If you've even heard of it, then you're already on your way into my PC gaming good books, whereas if you've already played it and are currently nodding knowingly as you read these words, then I salute you, sir or ma'am, for you are truly a person of exceptional gaming taste.

If you haven't, though, then step this way my friend, and let me take you back in time to discover an underrated PC exclusive classic that remains, decades later, laying dormant in the sands of time.

CRUCIBLE OF FIRE

An action-adventure slasher at its heart, *Draakan* recalls an age in PC

gaming in the late 1990s and early 2000s when, for both good and bad, the industry was still far more like the Wild West than it is today, with a free, pioneering, experimental spirit felt very much throughout the medium. Big-budget games could take wild swings at new genre ideas and gameplay mechanics, typified in titles like Peter Molyneux's *Black & White* (2001), Will Wright's *The Sims* (2000), or Shiny Entertainment's underrated gem *Sacrifice* (2000). And that's saying nothing of legendary game-changers like *Deus Ex* (2000), a game that could have only been born out of this era, where



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1999

DEVELOPER
Surreal Software

PUBLISHER
Psygnosis

LINK
tinyurl.com/5h55fjhs



I am fire. I
am... death.



‘triple-A budget’ and ‘mad new shit’ went hand in hand.

Today, while gaming is just as creative as ever, innovative new gameplay mechanics and ideas tend to come from small-scale indie developments, from the weird and wonderful games made by just a handful of devs that are free to implement new ideas in far more of a risky and corporate overwatch-free environment. I’m thinking of games like *Viewfinder*, *Balatro*, *Abiotic Factor*, *Animal Well*, *Pacific Drive*, *Deep Rock Galactic Survivor* and more. Compare the ‘new’ found in these games compared to the iterative content found in much of triple-A today and the change is clear: big-budget games today are more conservative than ever.

Released exclusively on PC in 1999, right in the heart of this pioneering period, *Drakan: Order of the Flame* was a game where just doing what everyone else had done was clearly not an option. So, while you step into the shoes of Rynn, a powerful warrior queen who more than a little bit will remind you of Lara Croft and the early (and clearly an influence on this game’s developer, Surreal Software) *Tomb Raider* games, any idea of playing

safe in the third-person action-adventure genre immediately melts away when you meet Arokh, the fire-breathing dragon who you will not only bond with, very much like in the movie *Dragonheart*, but then proceed to fly on and wage war with throughout this world. Yes, I’m sorry to say that *Doom: The Dark*

Ages got beaten to this specific punch 26 years ago.

LIKE A DRAGON

What’s most remarkable, still, about playing *Drakan* is its seamless dragon-riding mechanics, and especially so considering this game was made over a quarter of a century ago. Rynn can call and mount Arokh at will, using his fireball and fiery breath attacks to incinerate enemies, both on the ground and the sky (rival dragons must be duelled with), before flying to a specific part of *Drakan*’s expansive levels to dismount Arokh and then proceed to hack, slash and explore on foot.

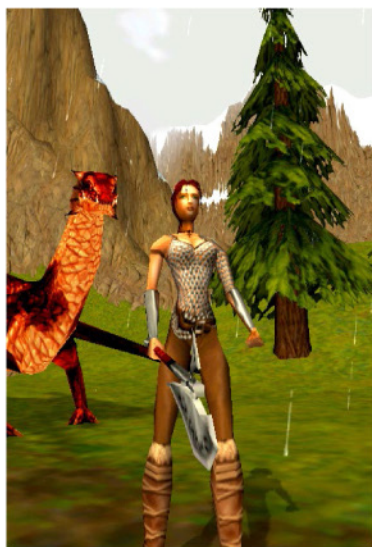
The result is a gameplay loop where, for the majority of the game, Rynn is fluidly fighting beasts on the ground, in caves, temples, crypts and more, before transitioning in moments to the skies on the back of Arokh, swooping, diving and outflanking enemies while bringing the heat to foes and structures alike. Wartock orcs, spiders, giants, goblins, zombies, scavengers, succubi and more all pose deadly threats on foot to Rynn, but under the intense heat of Arokh’s dragon breath they are soon eradicated. This ability makes

ANCIENT WYRM

How to get *Drakan* running on modern PCs

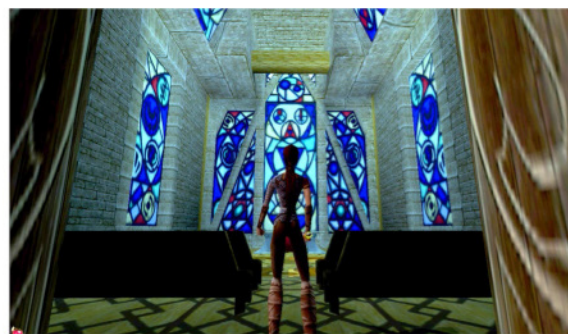


Getting *Drakan* to run today on modern hardware is tough, especially so as no official remake or remaster exists (come on GOG!). If you own an original copy of the game, though, like I do, then I advise you to peruse the downloads section of the awesome and long-running *Drakan* fan site, Arokh’s Lair (arokhslair.net), as it is a wealth of information and patches, both official and unofficial, that will help you get flying on Arokh today.



ABOVE: Mounting and dismounting Arokh is remarkably seamless, especially for a game released in 1999.

RIGHT: Just chilling out, spear in torso, as you do. Piña colada out of shot.



the times when you can lure enemies into the open, or to the entranceway of an interior area, only to then have Arokh torch them (he will fight foes on his own, too, if you are not mounted on him) all the sweeter. After all, your lifeforce is now bonded (if he dies you die, and vice-versa), and you must look out for each other.

There's something about the relationship that the game sets up and maintains between Rynn and Arokh, through cinematics as well as in-game vocals, that really immerses. Both Rynn and Arokh are fully voiced, and production values are high for the time, even if the quality of the voice acting (especially Rynn) now feels very dated by modern standards. Nevertheless, with plenty of banter and back and forth between these two stars of the game, it's hard not to get a feeling akin to that shared by Geralt and Roach in *The Witcher*. That Rynn and Arokh are joined in their mission is never in doubt, and that this feeling persists on replay after all these years is testament to the great work Surreal Software did here.

WAVES OF FLAME

There's no doubting that the dragon-riding action is the star of the

ACTION ON AROKH WAS CLEARLY INFLUENCED BY THE PANZER DRAGOON SERIES

show in *Drakan*, with it built into the lore and plot of the game, as well as a central pillar of the gameplay. Action on Arokh was clearly influenced by the *Panzer Dragoon* series, the first three games of which released from 1995-1998, but those games were far more restrictive in their scope, with mounted dragon combat the focus.

Nevertheless, combat on Arokh is a case of strafing and outflanking foes while landing far-reaching fireball attacks, or close quarters fire breath attacks, and doing so while not getting hit yourself. It really is surprisingly similar to *Doom: The Dark Ages*, actually. What do they say about imitation being the best form of flattery? This is the game at its innovative best.

Gameplay off Arokh feels very *Tomb Raider*, but with a greater focus on up-close hack-and-slash combat. While perfectly playable today, this is the game at its iterative worst. Rynn can backflip, dive into bodies of water, nimbly side-dodge, forward

roll and more, with a moveset that feels incredibly indebted to Miss Croft. In terms of attack and defence, though, Rynn can find and equip armour as well as a wide-number of shiny blades, axes and magic items, including health and invisibility potions. And she does this from a great inventory system, that when activated sees Rynn turn towards the player and stand ready while items are selected in a bottom-centre mounted inventory box overlay, like in an RPG. It's charming quite frankly, and a clear sign that this is a true PC game at heart.

When Rynn isn't attacking foes on foot, she's finding keys to open doors, flicking switches to open doors, or solving basic puzzles, some of why are (very basic) physics based. This is when *Drakan* feels most dated. However, the frustration of not finding a specific key aside, I don't feel they get in the way of enjoying its on-foot and dragon-mounted combat and story. So, yes. *Drakan* remains a cinematic fantasy adventure of genuine heart, and a bona fide PC classic that deserves re-appraisal today in terms of its impact on PC gaming. Fingers crossed the long-overdue remaster is incoming. ■



JESS KINGHORN



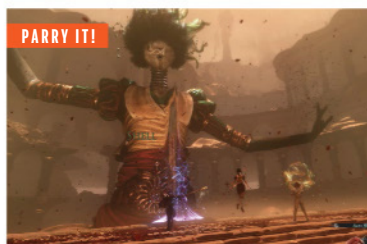
Rough around the edges? More like 'interesting texture to hold on to'. However you want to describe such games, you might as well throw up my bat signal either way.



SLITTERHEAD

store.steampowered.com

→ Here's a monster mash gristly in all the right ways that tickle my brainstem. Set in Kowloon, the body horror stalks the city's streets, disguising itself as any other civilian before explosively transforming to feed. What follows is a rough and ready series of bloody slap fights.



CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

expedition33.com

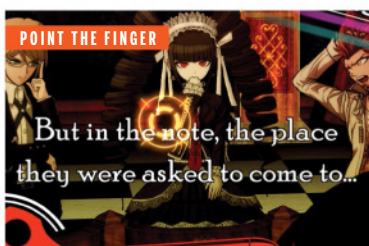
→ This RPG has become my entire personality, not least of all because the majority of its cast are grown-ass adults in their 30s. Though you're still wrestling with the genre mainstays of world-ending existentialism and turn-based fights, the formula here welcomes timing-based mechanics.



THE EXCAVATION OF HOB'S BARROW

wadjeteyegames.com

→ Thomasina Bateman blusters into the village of Bewlay in the hopes of excavating the titular tumulus. Though the rural residents are less than keen on her proposed spot of grave robbing, Thomasina reckons she knows best... and the rest is well worth digging into yourself.



DANGANRONPA: TRIGGER HAPPY HAVOC

danganronpa.us/danganronpa/home

→ Sixteen bright-eyed students with everything to live for are locked up. They're told they can either accept their fate and live together harmoniously or, in order to escape, must kill off another co-ed without getting caught.



SHADOW GAMBIT: THE CURSED CREW

shadowgambit.com

→ I love a stealth puzzler as much as the next pirate, but I don't love how grimy I feel save scumming towards my perfect preferred outcome. Maybe I'm just a control freak and should learn to let go – or maybe it's high time save scumming became a full game mechanic in its own right.



TWO POINT MUSEUM

twopointstudios.com

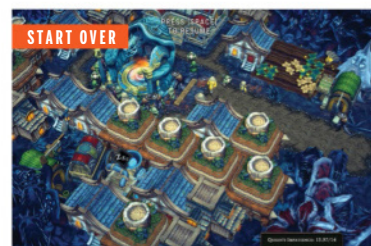
→ I've been finding these weird furry caterpillars all over my museum. I could not figure out where they were coming from until I looked real close at one of my experts. Realising she wasn't simply trying out a bold new look, and that I'd need more than tweezers to evict her hitchhikers.



A HAND WITH MANY FINGERS

colestia.itch.io/a-hand-with-many-fingers

→ This detective game is all about the fragility of the historical record. Comparing reference numbers and traipsing around with document boxes may not sound exhilarating, but all the while paranoia prods at you. Why is this box empty? Is that noise really just the pipes?



AGAINST THE STORM

eremitegames.com

→ I'm generally not a fan of town management games. The part of me that longs for a picturesque city is pretty grumpy about the less than aesthetic town taking shape. Here, a storm washes away your messiest plots, offering bouts of settlement building I can't get enough of.



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ISSN: 1351-3540

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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE FINAL PWN**

PART 6

The things that I want, by Dick Ray-Tracing. A smoke. A whiskey. For the sun to shine. I want to sleep. To forget. To change the past. My first love and Betty Sue back. Unlimited ammo and a license to kill. Right here, more than anything, though, I wanted Clencher and the corporate cancer at the heart of the videogame industry gone for good. And, as I looked down at my bloody and broken body, in that moment, I knew that there was only one option left. It was game over.

If you're reading this, then I've successfully transferred all my case files to date, including my complete investigation into the Console Gamer Collective, back to my office server. Read them. Judge me if you want, sure. But most of all, please forgive me.

Date: 11/09/2025

Case Number: 0451

Reporting Officer: Insp. Alyx Vance

Location of Incident: Reichenbach Falls, Switzerland

Incident: Missing Person / Suspected Homicide

Persons Involved: Primary: Dick Ray-Tracing

Secondary: Bill Clencher

We'd been tracking Ray-Tracing for months by the time we caught up with him at the Reichenbach Falls. You don't leave that amount of carnage in your wake without attracting attention, and we'd been trying to close the net on the private investigator and his operations which, increasingly, had seemed to spiral out of control. As the body count had climbed ever higher, the mysterious and seemingly all-powerful Console Gamer Collective seemed to be the root cause of Ray-Tracing's activities, but we had our CGC queries up the internal chain of command mysteriously shut down on a need to know basis. Dick was therefore my team's only way in, and we'd intended to collect both him and intel on the Console Gamer Collective.

My team reached a north-westerly outcrop overlooking the Reichenbach Falls just as Ray-Tracing and another man, later revealed to be MegaCorp's Console Gaming division's CEO, Bill Clencher, were having a heated interchange on the narrow ledge that overlooks the Falls' steep face. Clencher then began to laugh and, after a moment when Ray-Tracing appeared to just look down without moving and speak into his wristwatch before pressing a button on it, Ray-Tracing suddenly lunged at Clencher, the two men locking in a fierce melee wrestle.

My sniper and spotter team reported they could take a shot, but that it was impossible to guarantee both men wouldn't get hit. So I belayed that order. To this day I will not know if it was an incorrect decision or not. As a moment later, with both men throttling each other and swaying wildly, Clencher headbutted Ray-Tracing and then Ray-Tracing, reeling and covered in blood, dived at Clencher and, making full-body contact, forced both men off their feet and careening over the falls' precipice. The last thing I saw was the two men plummeting to their doom into the dark, mist-filled cavern at the base of the falls. No bodies were ever recovered.

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